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HOSTILE LIFE-FORM

by DANIEL L. GALOUYE

illustrated by EMSH

The otterillas were just about the most vicious form of life that could be encountered on any new planet. It was lucky they had a natural enemy on that world

CAPTAIN Parker, chief of the trouble-shooting detail, stepped out of the shuttle boat, flipped his cap up off his forehead and soberly surveyed the settlement site.

It was much worse than it had appeared through the magni-scopes on the big ship, now unmanned and orbiting two thousand miles out.

Tatters of clothing, horribly stained, were strewn about. Pitifully inadequate sidearms lay here and there, mute evidence of their own uselessness. The colonists' huts were mercilessly battered—doors crashed in; windows shattered; gaping, splintered holes in the walls.

Parker shook his head disconsolately. This was all that was left of a hundred colonists and their effects.

Lieutenant Simpson, second in command, came over and offered a limp salute. "That about does it." He gestured toward the crew shoveling the last few spadefuls of dirt on a broad, low mound.

"Communal burial?" Parker asked.

"What else? The things that hit them didn't leave much."

"Any idea what they were?"

Simpson, a stocky redhead with stout, freckled forearms, nodded brusquely. "Otterillas. That's what we call them."



"What?" Parker asked densely.

"Those devils over there. We just knocked off a couple. They're vicious."

He indicated a hill half a mile away and handed over his binoculars.

Parker focused the lenses. The animals—all four—were indisputably as vicious as Simpson's muffled oath had implied. The captain studied one.

It was long—five feet, at least—and otterlike in general form. But there were a half-dozen legs on each side of the brown, furry body and the face vaguely resembled a gorilla's, differing only in the inordinate length of its fangs. The two forward limbs, held poised, were equipped with huge, formidable pincers.

Parker swore, returning the binoculars. "The original survey report didn't mention anything like *that*."

"No, it didn't." Simpson laughed dryly. "The two we bagged weighed in at over a hundred pounds apiece. Must have migrated from another area."

"But the whole planet was

supposed to have been checked out."

"Somebody slipped up." The lieutenant spat sardonically. "It was one hell of a massacre."

THE taxiing jets of the shuttle craft worked with a muffled, erratic roar and Parker watched the pilot park it across the field and hurry back to join the work detail.

The captain was a tall, bony man whose relaxed stance and blunt, angular face suggested indifference and awkwardness. Only intense concern and resolution, however, were evident in his earnest stare.

Simpson started over toward a colonist's hut that had obviously been patched up to serve as a headquarters building. "Damned if we couldn't use a few zip-guns and a couple of drum-casters this time out," he observed wistfully.

Parker stared askance at the lieutenant as the latter held the door open for him. "You make it sound downright grim."

"Don't sell the situation short, Skipper. We knocked down two otterillas, all right.

But it took over three hundred rounds from nineteen guns to do it. I'm convinced they can sense the approach of a Wattley-charge and get out of the way."

Captain Parker whistled a sober exclamation of surprise and went on into the hut.

"There aren't too many of those damned things in the area," Simpson revealed, "but they're drifting in steadily. I hope we can get out of here fast."

Parker dropped into a chair and raked his cap back until its visor crowned a tuft of graying hair. "But we can't. The Old Man wants this place cleaned up and resettled. He's already got another boatload of suckers on the way over."

"Wonderful!" the lieutenant exuberated sarcastically. "I hope we're still here to welcome them."

"Think a stockade would help?"

"Possibly. But I'd suggest using damned big posts."

Parker laughed encouragingly. "It can't be that bad."

A coarse scream sounded outside and then the air suddenly popped and crackled

with the blast of Wattley-gun charges.

Parker hurled the door open and lunged out, his weapon expectantly exploring the air ahead of him. In another second he found his target.

Separated from the burial detail, an ashen-faced youth stumbled back across the field. He desperately swung his shovel, trying to fend off a vicious assault by one of the otterillas.

The speed and ferocity of the thing's attack presented an indistinct blur as it darted forward, pincers snapping, then backed off and wheeled about, only to push in relentlessly from another direction.

Parker cut loose with his Wattley-gun. The pellets of static charge that belched intermittently from its muzzle converged with streams of death issuing forth from a score of other weapons.

Undismayed though, the otterilla pressed its attack, pausing fleetingly to dodge volleys of Wattley-charges and maneuver its prey between itself and its attackers.

"Give us shooting room,

Johnson!" Parker shouted at the youth.

"Hit the ground!" Simpson urged desperately.

But a snip of the powerful pincers wrenched the shovel from Johnson's grasp and splintered the handle. Desperately, he whirled and streaked into one of the huts, slamming the door. The animal charged the wall and hit the stout boards with thunderous impact. It crashed through.

Johnson barged out of the hut and the otterilla tore through another wall in pursuit.

The captain emptied his gun at the thing without scoring a hit.

Then there was a streak of motion past his legs and a small, darting form, moving so swiftly as to be almost indiscernible, hurled itself at the otterilla.

Johnson stumbled and fell, folding his arms protectively over his head as the two animals closed in combat. Rolling over and over, they concealed themselves in a cloud of dust.

But the fight lasted only a moment. And, unbelieving, Parker watched the smaller

creature rise and back off from the still form of the otterilla.

The victorious animal was about half the size of the other. It had a small, scaly face and a dense, humped back. It was covered with armorlike hide and resembled nothing as much as it did an armadillo.

But the tail was something else. Formed of the same chitinous substance as the hide, it flashed sharp and steel-like as it slipped back into a concealed sheath under its body.

The thing went over to Johnson. Yelping reassuringly, it began licking the youth's face. Dazed, Johnson sat up and stroked its back. It whined even more pleasurably, then turned to the vanquished otterilla and began feeding.

WORK on the stockade progressed at a less than satisfying tempo. Two days after his arrival, the captain, pacing restlessly under the canopy in front of headquarters hut, expressed his disappointment.

Simpson spread his hands deferentially. "Without any

heavy equipment it's the best we can do."

"Not good enough. It's taken two days to erect a hundred feet of spiked fence. Four acres have to be enclosed. That leaves us with approximately thirty days of stockading."

Parker pointed toward the hill in the distance. "Yesterday," he continued, "we had six of those devils out there. Today I counted nine. I don't like it. I want more protection—and faster than we're getting it."

"What do you suggest?" Simpson asked coldly.

"You've got ten men on reconstruction. Add them to the fencing detail and we'll get the job done in fifteen days. Repairing the huts can wait."

The lieutenant strode off. Parker pulled his chair up to the table and began filling out his initial report. Minutes later he started, though, at a gentle tugging on his boot.

Glancing beneath the table, he looked down into the sheepishly fetching eyes of the armadillo-like creature that had presumptively adopted the trouble-shooting detail as its

undisputed own ever since it had rescued Johnson.

"Affectionate little thing, isn't it?"

Parker looked up to see Janvier, the zoologist, standing there with a book spread open across his forearm. He was a small, lean man with an eternal, well-intentioned smile.

"One would think," the zoologist offered, "that nature on this world created the likes of our little friend here to apologize for having spawned the otterilla."

The captain stared at the open volume. "Find out anything about these life forms yet?"

Janvier nodded. "Like you said, the dope sheet makes no mention of the otterillas. But there's an entry for our benefactor. The survey index of fauna indigenous to Vitar-IV lists him as a *dasypus pseud-armadil*."

Parker ran a hand over the creature's rock-hard back. "We'll call you Daisy for short. That all right, fellow?" Then, to Janvier, "What else does it say about them?"

"Not further investigated due to standard quarantine of

questionable animals pending authorized study'."

"Too bad. If the colonists had known what it could do to an otterilla, they might have escaped a massacre."

Daisy, playfully nibbling at Parker's heel, turned suddenly and leaped into his lap. The captain grunted under the impact and nudged the thing off.

"Heavier than it looks, huh?" the zoologist asked.

"Too heavy to be a lap pet, at any rate."

Parker experimentally nudged the thing's rear end with his foot. Frolicsomenely, it turned and gnawed on the sole of his boot. More forcefully, he prodded the posterior plate of its armor. Then, still unsatisfied, he gave it a decided kick.

"I tried that too," Janvier disclosed. "But even by booting hell out of it I couldn't get the thing to unsheath its weapon. Apparently, nature intended it for use only against otterillas."

Simpson returned scowling from the stockade detail. "I wouldn't be too sure of that," he said, cutting in on the conversation. "If it can polish off an otterilla, I wouldn't trust it

half the distance of its tail."

The pseudarmadil tensed, perked its ears and cocked its head in the direction of a bush fifty feet away. Parker and Simpson drew their Wattley-guns. Janvier backed off apprehensively.

The animal streaked for the bush and disappeared into its foliage. Parker turned to shout a warning to the fencing detail. But Daisy scurried back into sight, followed by four other pseudarmadils.

Parker beamed enthusiastically. "More protection."

THE otterillas attacked two days later, with only slightly more than one-eighth of the stockade completed.

They charged the camp in an incredible burst of speed. They came early in the morning, striking terror and confusion and routing the men with the fury of their guttural roars.

They overran the guard, a two-striper from the Vegan System, who stuck valiantly at his post firing ineffectually. A boiling, slithering mass of brown fur and snapping pincers, the dozen or so otterillas

paused briefly, churning over the spot where the youth had fallen.

The delay, though, gave the five pseudarmadils time to rally, form a crescent-shaped line of attack and hurl themselves on the murderous horde.

But even then two otterillas broke through and charged the center of the camp where Parker and his trouble-shooting detail had hurriedly gathered.

Concentrated and sustained firepower from every Wattley-gun brought down the foremost otterilla. The second was in midleap, aiming itself at the group of men, when it was overtaken by Daisy in a lightning-swift sortie from the main battle.

When the attackers retreated they left four dead at the camp site. Parker turned all guns over to one of the men for recharging and assigned two workers to a burial detail for the casualty.

Over coffee in headquarters hut, the captain paused soberly and stared at Simpson. "This convinces me we've got to get more pseudarmadils in camp."

"How?" the lieutenant

asked somewhat skeptically.

"Go out and find them. Lure them back."

"With those otterillas congregating out there?"

Janvier let his cup drop noisily into the saucer, his usual grin gone. "The only place I've seen otterillas is west of here, on that hill. I imagine if we struck out to the east we shouldn't run into too many."

Simpson grunted disparagingly. "You won't get any volunteers to go hunt for pseudos—not after what just happened."

Parker tensed. "I'm not asking for any. I'm going myself."

The lieutenant flashed clenched teeth through a sarcastic grin. "We'll remember you a long, long time, Skipper."

"I'm taking Daisy and one of her friends. That'll leave three pseudarmadils in camp. I don't think the otterillas will attack again before we get back."

Janvier rose. "I'd like to go along."

"Why?" Parker stared obliquely at the little man, sur-

prised over the unexpected display of courage.

"I may learn something about the natural environment of *dasybus pseudarmadil* that would help."

Simpson laughed tensely. "You may learn," he said sarcastically, "that we shouldn't be feeding the damned things and keeping them in camp."

"Why not?" Parker demanded. "We've enough provisions left by the colonists to feed an army of them."

"That's not quite what I mean. Maybe by satisfying their appetites we're keeping them from going out and killing otterillas. We could be upsetting the ecology and encouraging an accumulation of those devils."

Parker dismissed the criticism with a laugh. "I'd rather feed them enough to make sure they stay than to see them wander off."

The lieutenant hunched determinedly over the table. "I say let's get out of here. We're just inviting another massacre."

The captain folded his hands soberly before him. "It takes

three hours to ferry two men back to the ship. A withdrawal operation would take over a day and a half. Now, Lieutenant, if you'd agree to be among the last two to be picked up, I'll okay a retreat to orbit."

Simpson said nothing.

Parker rose. "Then we'll try to get along with our mission as directed and Janvier and I will plan a pseudarmadil hunt for tomorrow morning. In the meantime, you try to get the lead out on that stockading project."

Simpson hunched his shoulders futilely. "We've covered a little over two hundred and fifty feet. We still have some thirteen hundred to go. And you can't get top efficiency out of a bunch of scared workers."

One of the men entered the hut excitedly. "You know what the latest count is on those otterillas, Skipper?"

Parker shifted uneasily. "There were twelve in that attack. We got four—we and the pseudos. That should leave eight."

"Right," the man clipped. "But seven more just moved in."

PARKER pushed cautiously into the forest, moving through shafts of sunlight that slanted down from rifts in the dense foliage. Tensely aware of the inadequacy of his weapon, he was only indifferently conscious of the rhythmic slapping of the Wattle-gun holster against his thigh.

Janvier followed closely, leading Daisy and the other pseudarmadil on leashes.

A mile from camp an obscure form whimpered in a thicket and the zoologist hurriedly freed Daisy. There was no hostility in the animal's actions, though, as it sauntered over to the underbrush and stood yelping softly at the rustling leaves.

Finally two pseudarmadils emerged, excitedly answering Daisy's squeaky tones. The pet returned and drew up heeling behind Parker. Its newfound friends filed along.

A thousand feet farther another armor-plated creature joined the procession; a mile away, two more. Parker, flushed with the success of the roundup, turned off on a new course and headed back in the

general direction of the settlement site.

Over a slight rise and down in a ravine they found a sixth pseudarmadil devouring a freshly killed otterilla. The others joined in the feast.

Some time later Parker led the eight animals out into a clearing and pulled up beside what was obviously the fragmented remains of an eggshell. Yellowish-ivory, the pieces were coarse in texture and mottled with regularly spaced red splotches. The effect was almost a polka-dot pattern.

"What do you make of it, Janvier?" he asked.

"It must have been quite an egg, judging from the curvature of the pieces."

Parker examined a particularly large fragment. Mentally reconstructing the whole object, he conceded that the egg had been rather impressive in size.

The zoologist pointed at another spot, and another, and another. All featured concentrations of eggshell fragments. "Spawning place for something or other," he observed.

But the captain, intent on something up ahead, strode

forward and drew up beside a mottled ovoid twice the size of a spaceman's helmet. "Here's one that hasn't hatched out yet."

The zoologist knelt beside it and ran his fingers over the hard surface. He bent his ear to the egg, then tapped it lightly.

He looked up. "I'd venture the opinion that it never will. Observe how the red splotches are faded. Probably been sitting here quite a while."

Janvier stood up and brought his heel down on the ovoid. Then he wedged his fingers into the crack and pried the two halves apart.

Before the stench sent them reeling away they had a chance to see the putrefying embryo within. It was quite unmistakably a *dasytus pseudarmadil*.

"So," said Janvier, holding a handkerchief to his nose, "that's where our little friends come from. I never would have figured Daisy to be oviparous."

By the time they reached camp, four more of the fawning creatures had joined the retinue, playfully scurrying between Parker's and Janvier's

legs and nipping friskfully at their heels.

Simpson, supervising the stockading project, only glanced unimpressed at the collection of pseudarmadils and turned his attention back to the less than four hundred feet of fencing that had been constructed thus far.

Parker disregarded the other's indifference. "At least," he offered, "we ought to be over the hump on the matter of safety. We've got fifteen pseudos in our arsenal now."

But the lieutenant sneeringly jerked a thumb toward the otterillas on the hill. "Yeah? Well that family reunion out there drew in more relatives, too, while you were gone. Count 'em. There're thirty now."

DURING the next week eight more pseudarmadils wandered into camp and became fast pets.

Seven hundred additional feet were built on the stockade, enclosing more than half of the camp area and blocking off view of the shuttle craft and part of the forest.

The otterillas launched two

more attacks, killing one man in the first and two in the second. That reduced the camp personnel to seventeen.

Daisy and her armored cohorts, however, took a toll of nineteen otterillas during the two assaults. But, with the continued arrival of the huge beasts, their number had grown to more than fifty.

Simpson was even more imperious over the situation—almost to the point of being outright insubordinate. Disregarding Parker's rank, he pressed his point at mess one sultry evening when all the men were exhausted from a fourteen-hour fence building stint.

The lieutenant abruptly tossed his empty mess kit on the table. "I say let's get off the defensive and break up that otterilla soiree. Let's put these pseudos on a diet, then send them out to scatter those things!"

Parker looked up wearily over a piece of synthoprotein balanced on his fork. "We'll stick to our original plan," he said simply, "and keep the pseudos as our first line of defense."

"But it's no good!" Simpson

reared up and drove his fist into his palm. "We got predators that can take care of those otterillas. But what do we do? We keep them in camp—fed and happy!"

The captain glanced up patiently. "As long as the otterillas are in the majority, we can't risk an encounter. It might mean more casualties."

"I rather agree," Janvier said absently, stroking one of the pseudarmadils that lay contently beside him. "If we turned them loose on the otterillas our little friends might let us down in an orgy of feasting when we need them most."

Simpson bristled. "But if we don't turn them loose, that otterilla horde will keep on growing!"

"Simply a matter of timing." Parker shrugged. "As soon as we finish the stockade, then we can let our pseudos take care of the otterillas. But not before."

The captain brushed back a shock of hair that appeared even more gray in the thin back-glow from the camp's spotlight. "But before we think of exterminating the otterillas, there's something else we have

to consider—something we should have done a week ago.”

All eyes turned inquiringly on the Skipper.

“Beside reconditioning the settlement area,” he continued, “we’ve got to determine precisely why the colonists were taken off guard. To do that we must know a good deal more about the otterillas than we do now.”

Simpson gestured impatiently. “Quit pussyfooting around the point. What are you trying to say?”

“Janvier’s got to have a specimen to study—alive.”

The lieutenant choked over a protest couched in invective.

The zoologist nodded affirmatively. “That’s right!”

“And who’s going to take the tiger by the tail? And how?” Simpson thrust his fists on his hips.

Janvier indicated an unopened crate. “I’ve been giving it some thought. We’ve got two portable cages strong enough to hold those beasts. I propose building a trap and setting it up outside camp.”

“Traps need bait,” Simpson interrupted with feigned indulgence.

“I’m aware of that, Lieutenant. *I’ll* be in one of the cages with a trip release to spring the door of the other one shut.”

Parker shook his head. “I’m overruling the plan as far as the bait is concerned. We’ve got only one zoologist and no chance of getting a replacement. So I’m asking for a volunteer.”

Johnson stepped forward. “I’ll do it. Seems reasonably safe.”

They prepared the cages the next day, Janvier himself wielding the torch to spot-weld their rear bars together.

Then the entire camp complement, accompanied by the fifteen pseudarmadils, bore the double cage halfway to the otterilla concentration. Johnson was secured in the rear compartment and the trap was set.

Back in camp Parker watched through binoculars as the otterilla horde advanced, cautiously at first, then in a burst of speed to swarm over the trap. At one point in the confusion he saw the door fall shut.

Hours passed before the ani-

mals were finally convinced they could not break through the bars. But even then four persistent beasts continued pacing around the cage after the others had withdrawn. Impatiently, Captain Parker ordered a concerted Wattle-gun and pseudarmadil attack on the diehards.

When they retrieved the cage Johnson was dead. Apparently he had been confused and frightened on finding himself surrounded by the vicious beasts and had stumbled back into the range of the trapped animal's pincers.

But the captured otterilla was a fine specimen, both Janvier and Parker agreed.

WITHIN the next four days all but the final thirty feet of the stockade had been completed. Its effectiveness was proved in two determined attacks launched against the stout logs by the enraged beasts. Futilely, the otterillas hurled themselves against the spiked fence again and again.

In the second attack, though, they circled the enclosed area until they found the still unfenced stretch and

poured through. But the pseudarmadils put up a brief, deadly defense and repulsed the onslaught, killing five of the big animals.

The camp counted two men dead—victims of beasts which had breached the protective line of the pseudarmadils during the furious action. And, exasperated, Parker ordered no mess and no rest periods until the final thirty feet of the stockade had been completed.

With the men working feverishly, the captain climbed to the lookout tower and focused his binoculars on the otterilla congestion. He estimated their number; tensed, and tried another rough calculation.

For verification he tried counting the milling beasts several times. No two counts came out the same. But he was at least able to gain a rough average which he considered reasonably correct. There were apparently sixty-four otterillas on the hill.

He lowered the binoculars slowly, convinced now that there was reason for hope. Yesterday he had estimated eighty-two otterillas; the day before, ninety-seven. Their

number was decreasing for the first time. Parker wondered why. Then, suddenly, he thought he had the answer.

Pseudarmadils had continued to straggle into the camp, until now there was a total of twenty-nine. But those coming in had tarried outside long enough to kill off one or two of the otterillas.

Simpson had probably been right in his surmisal that by domesticating the smaller creatures the camp had upset the ecological balance of the immediate area. But nature was, after all, bringing things into equilibrium again, even despite the meddling influence of the humans.

He smiled hopefully. By tomorrow the number of otterillas should be down in the fifties, or perhaps even in the forties. And the stockade would be finished. The latter development alone would ensure the safety of the camp.

But he wouldn't let it rest at that, he decided resolutely. He would evict Daisy and the other pseudarmadils and let them take the fight of extermination to the enemy.

Descending the ladder from

the tower, he watched Janvier and the imprisoned specimen. The zoologist had succeeded in anesthetizing the otterilla and was now in the cage with it. Parker went over and circled the steel cell, scattering the dozen or so pseudarmadils that had congregated there in hope of finding a way to get at the larger animal.

Janvier looked up. "We'll have plenty to put in the survey index on otterillas."

"You're getting it all doped out?"

The zoologist nodded. "For one thing it's not mammalian, despite the fact that it would seem to fall in that category. Notice—no mammary glands."

Parker scratched his head dubiously. "What about that thing on Bellam-II? It didn't have mammary glands either—until the final stage of pregnancy."

The zoologist laughed. "This thing *is* in the final stage of pregnancy. If the indications are correct, we should have a baby otterilla running around this cage within the next forty-eight hours."

THE stockade, gate and all, was finished late that night.

Parker mustered the thirteen men, surveyed them solicitously and proclaimed a two-day rest period before resuming repairs on the huts.

Even Simpson was subdued by fatigue as he accompanied the captain back toward their individual quarters.

The lieutenant smiled conciliatively. "Looks like you picked the right course, Skipper. I'm sorry if I confused things by being stubborn."

Parker grasped his shoulder. "I like a man with convictions—even if they're wrong ones. Conviction is the essence of leadership."

Simpson paused in front of his hut and stared wearily at the moon dropping low in the west. "Are we going to make our schedule?"

"I think so."

"Even with this two-day layoff?"

Parker nodded. "The new colonists aren't due in for another week. We'll have things ready for them."

Simpson turned to enter his quarters. But the captain called out after him, "Send out

your two pseudos. I'm rounding up all of them."

The lieutenant stared askance at him.

"I'm following your suggestion," Parker explained, "and booting them all out so they can mop up on those otterillas. They haven't had anything to eat all day. They ought to do a real good job."

"I'd like to stay up and watch the fireworks," Simpson grinned. "But I'm beat."

The captain was exhausted too. But, after he had turned Daisy and the other pseudarmadils out and closed the gate behind them, he stayed awake long enough to hear the faint, dire sounds of carnage drifting with muffled stridency through the still night air.

HE watched the final thrashing of the slaughter the next morning from the observation tower while, stretching all around the camp, the spiked posts of the stockade stood like indomitable sentries, strong and reassuring.

Carcasses of otterillas dotted the hillside. Here and there a swirling cloud of dust marked a desperate mortal battle.

Occasionally a huge, scurrying form darted from a bush, only to be overtaken and set upon by four or five fleeting pseud-armadils. The shrieks of death issuing from the gorillalike faces lay heavy and shrill on the calm morning air.

One by one, the rest of the camp's personnel climbed the tower to watch—silently at first, then lustily cheering the pseudarmadils in skirmishes that continued to break out all over the hillside and on the fringe of the forest.

Finally the last duel had been fought and the armored creatures settled down to feasting, an unnatural silence falling over the field of battle.

Somehow Parker sensed that a delicate balance had been restored in the course of the slaughter he had just witnessed. It was as though the otterillas, which should have fallen before the slashing tails of the smaller creatures weeks ago, had in their belated deaths finally satisfied the ecological requirements of this coarse, raw world.

He broke out the liquor stores left by the colonists and

passed generous rations out among the thirteen men. The celebration was unrestrained. It carried vigorously through the morning and well into the afternoon.

Parker joined the general revelry for a while, but recognized a potentially serious situation when several of the men began throwing occasional Wattley-charges at the caged otterilla.

He confiscated all guns, locked them in the cabinet in his hut and spent the next ten minutes reassuring Janvier that nothing would happen to his specimen.

"It would be unfortunate if it did," the other returned stiffly. "It's already gone into labor and will give birth in the next few hours. I'd like to turn the parent and offspring over to the colonial zoologist in good condition for further study."

He turned back to stare interestedly through the bars.

"You suppose it would be disturbed if I let the pseudarmadils back into the stockade?" Parker asked.

Janvier glanced up dubiously. "Is it necessary?"

"They've all come back from the kill and they're milling around outside the gate. I wouldn't want them to feel wholly unwanted. They might go away for good."

"Let them. They've served their purpose."

"No." Parker shook his head. "I've decided that any scheme of colonization for this world will have to include domesticated pseudarmadils. That will prevent future congestions of otterillas."

KEEPING the armored creatures away from the cage was even less of a problem than Parker had imagined. The pseudarmadils moved listlessly in through the gate, their heads drooping sluggishly and their eyes half closed.

At first the captain feared the entire horde had been stricken with some illness. But then he smiled understandingly as he realized they simply must have stuffed themselves to a ridiculous degree on the flesh of their otterilla victims.

Sympathetic but still amuse, he watched them wander off into the various huts or drop lethargically in the

shade of the buildings to fall into a sated slumber.

Late that afternoon, after the men had surrendered to the drowsiness of near inebriation and retired to their huts to sleep it off, Parker withdrew to his quarters too, leaving Janvier to maintain his lonely vigil over the laboring otterilla.

It was night when the captain awoke and there was a stifling heaviness on his chest. He brought his hand up to push off whatever it was that lay there and his fingers contacted the dense hide of one of the pseudarmadils.

He reached over, turned on the light, then struggled to dislodge the suddenly ponderous weight that was the sleeping Daisy. Gorged as it was, it felt as though it weighed a ton.

Unaroused by his prodding, Daisy crashed to the floor and rolled over without stirring. Evidently it was still in its gluttonous stupor.

But there was something else, he saw as he looked more closely. The creature had turned a delicate shade of green, suggestive of the complexion of a child suffering

from overindulgence in unripe apples.

Concerned, he studied the two pseudarmadils in the hut. They were exhibiting the same symptoms as Daisy.

In Simpson's quarters, he knelt tensely beside the two more armor-plated animals with sickly green complexions while the lieutenant snored unconcernedly. One of the pets, however, seemed to be sicker than the others. It had lost several scales from its chitinous plating and the missing spaces were like little squares of brown surrounded by the verdent sea that was the rest of its body.

All the pseudarmadils in the other huts where the men slept were similarly affected. The stupor from having stuffed themselves Parker could readily understand. But the shedding of scales was something else...unless such an effect was the result of battling the otterillas. At any rate, he decided, he'd better call the zoologist in on the matter.

THE captain stepped out of his hut into the still, early evening. A dense quietness lay

over the nocturnal scene. On the left, a lactescent moon swam through wisps of tenuous clouds. The almost foreboding hush that gripped the camp was like a frozen bit of eternity.

He strode misgivingly down the main street and was intensely relieved to find some other evidence of life as he turned the corner and headed toward the spot-lighted area of the caged otterilla.

Janvier was there—dedicated, loyal, staunchly maintaining his watch over the cell and the thing that lay motionless in the shadows.

But the birth was over! Parker could tell that much from the expression on the zoologist's face as Janvier backed apprehensively away from the cage, his eyes wide with alarm and his lips trembling on unuttered words.

"Janvier! What is it? What's wrong?"

The zoologist turned and stared numbly at Parker without seeing him. "We should have known!" he mumbled. "God, we should have guessed when we found the pseudarmadil hatching place. That egg

we broke open—it was as big as the pseudos themselves! How could one of *them* have laid it?”

Confounded, Parker brushed past the man and strode toward the cage, trying to pierce the darkness to see what was inside.

But Simpson's voice roared from the direction of his quarters. “Parker! Look at this! Good God—Parker!”

The lieutenant staggered forward into the spot-lighted area, holding out the empty armor-plated hide of a pseudarmadil.

“It came out!” he babbled. “Those things—they aren't sick! They're *s h e d d i n g — c h a n g i n g !*”

Numbly, Parker turned back to the cage, his eyes now accustomed to the dim light. The female otterilla had withdrawn to a corner and was cringing, as though afraid of the thing to which it had given birth.

In the center of the cell lay a huge egg, twice the size of a spaceman's helmet and mottled with bright red splotches.

Simpson screamed and Parker whirled around to see a

half-grown otterilla, its damp fur shining under a coating of serous slime, advancing on the lieutenant from the direction of the huts. He dropped the pseudarmadil husk and backed away, terrified.

“That thing came out of this pseud armor!” he shouted, pointing alternately at the stalking animal and the discarded hide.

“Good God!” Janvier stammered. “It—it m e t a m o r p h o s e d ! A t w o - s t a g e l i f e c y c l e ! P s e u d a r m a d i l a n d o t t e r i l l a ! ”

The beast lunged forward, seized the armor it had shed only minutes earlier and crumbled it between its pincers. It stuffed the pieces into the gorilla face where hideous fangs completed the job of mastication.

And suddenly the pall of stillness that had hung over the camp was lifting. There was a stirring here, an ominous scurrying there, the harsh, explosive sound of splintering boards, an occasional scream.

Parker, Simpson and the zoologist turned and raced for the stockade gate.

But they never made it.

THE END

LITTLE AMERICA ON THE MOON

by ARTHUR J. BURKS

illustrated by EMSH

A base on the Moon was the key to space, the stepping stone to the planets. It was more than that. A nation that controlled the Moon was the master of Earth, too

SEVEN prospective Moon mothers had rocketed back to Earth to bear their children. Kay Archer was resolved to be the eighth. Six mothers had so far found excuses to delay their return to Luna and their prisoner husbands. Kay was *sure* she would return to Monte, even in his prison.

Kay stood behind her glass window, keeping up her courage, and stared at the brazen dusty waste which extended to the base of Mount Pyramid. Not even an A-bomb explosion would make a sound out there. There was no atmosphere on

Moon save that which its prisoners carried with them.

"Keep watching, Kay," the endless meteorite 'rain' seemed to whisper, "they'll be coming 'round Pyramid any moment now."

She swallowed a scream. For seven periods of twenty four hours, the first half of the two-week lunar day, she had spent eons at this fantastically deep-inset window, watching for Monte and his associate explorers, trying not to feel sorry for herself and the child to come. She was no more prisoner than was Monte, but Monte



was dedicated to his prison, which none who lived on Moon could escape.

In Archer Mansion itself each separate room was a cell, sealed into the mountain to protect it from solar radiation, from constant bombardment by millions of meteorites, mostly too small to see, and to retain the processed atmosphere required for life. If ever the seal were punctured and the synthetic atmosphere escaped into the void, it would take the mangled remains of its occupants with it.

Buxton Mountain, the "home" mountain, named for Angus Buxton, whose millions of Earth dollars were exploiting Moons resources, was honeycombed with "houses" like this of the first family, the Archers. Each house was a separate prison, locked away by itself. There was little visiting back and forth. Few women cared to crawl through the endless series of connecting airlocks a second time, and only fanatics did it a third time. Nature was rapidly making it quite impossible for Kay even to consider visiting other

Moon "widows." Television served, but coldly.

The first of the balloon men—so she always thought of them—came into sight around the left-hand sharp ridge of Pyramid Mountain. That would be, would have to be, Monte. But one, even one who loved him, couldn't tell just by looking. They all looked alike, and all looked monstrous. Only her heart identified her man. Monte and his dozen associates were prisoners, each of them also apart, in their cumbersome space-suits, which held the barest necessities of life, especially oxygen; helmet radios, concentrated foods, and gadgets. The gadgets were Geiger counters, compasses, theodolites, sketch paper, water....

Now all the returning explorers were in sight and Kay sighed with relief. There had been no casualties. Those dozen men, in their space suits, walked side by side, slept side by side, with horrible death every instant they were outside their homes, offices, shops, garages or laboratories, their constant companion. The tiniest of meteorites, penetrating

a space suit, meant oblivion. No man could help another.

As if they feared some accident during the last lap, as if they feared some hideous pursuit, the returnees started to run. This was always, to Kay, the most heartbreaking phase of the return. In spite of its ridiculous appearance, she had never known any Lunar inhabitant to laugh.

Gravity pull on the Moon was one sixth that of the Earth. Roughly, then, when a man set out to step a yard, he was likely to execute a slow-motion leap of eighteen feet, and to land with considerable awkwardness. Monte had struggled, as had his men, to master normal walking on the surface of the Moon. But once in sight of home they no longer tried. They ran. They jumped high, like suddenly released toy balloons—eight-foot high, four-feet thick, oval “toy” balloons, equipped with helmets so, Monte said, “you can tell which end is up”—flailing their arms to maintain balance as they dropped to the blazing surface. And all the time, Kay knew, they were being pelted by meteorites. Even in sight of home

a man could die horribly.

Kay was sure that every wife whose husband returned with her's, stood behind her zlass window, heart in mouth, praying her husband safely home. All except those wives who, when their times were near, returned to Mother Earth to bear their children. She tried not to remember them, especially the three who had asked for divorces from their Moon-prisoner husbands.

“I *can't* bear a child in this big silent jail!” Kay wailed inside. “Why should I be first, my child be first? I'll tell Monte before he overpowers me just by being with me.”

SHE was always rebellious while he was away. When he was at home, in this largest of his several “offices”, it wasn't so bad. Their home was the counterpart of her former Earth home, except that nothing in it, actually, was “Earth.” Oh, it was real enough, but it wasn't what they pretended. The chairs, tables, stools, beds, were not wooden at all. They were made of the many lunar plastics Monte and his associates had developed under the

constant verbal nagging of Old Angus Buxton, President of Lunar Industrial, and Monte's boss, who snarled across space from New York City offices:

"What are you producing for my money?"

Kay knew what she would do after the baby was born, on Earth, out of prison; she would go to Old Angus and call him all the names she had invented expressly for him, during endless Moon-hours of meditation. Now, she pushed him out of mind, concentrated her mind, body and soul, on Monte. She watched the jiggling balloons make their silly, heart-hurting way across the treeless, shrubless, otherwise lifeless, half mile stretch between the base of Pyramid and the base of Mount Buxton—whose heart and arteries was Buxton City—and vanish into the outer airlock, whose door was invisible under an overhang below her window. Her mind began to follow the endless series of airlocks by which the men, mole-like, returned to their own homes. Small airlocks, near the last, through which they crawled; fearfully

restricted airlocks designed to allow the escape of not one wisp of oxygen more than absolutely necessary.

Kay began to compose herself. She fought to regain cheerfulness, to find smiles, to bring joy to her eyes, to perk up, to be the Kay her husband had every right to expect at journey's end. She even addressed her son or daughter—daughter, she hoped—to whom, in the silent watches, wherein she could hear nothing but the ceaseless humming of dynamos in Mount Buxton's heart, she often spoke as one courageous lady to another.

"Help me not to hurt him!"

She turned, walked away from the window, into her spacious, indirectly lighted, air-conditioned (even the oxygen processed, she reminded herself, from the deep crust of the Moon) sitting room, and lowered herself into the easy chair that faced the room end of the last airlock. She watched the plastic door....

"Cat!" she snapped at herself. "Cat! Watching for the mouse to come out the hole! But anyway, it's *my* mouse,

and I'm only going to *half* eat him!"

She heard meteorites on the roof. The roof, she knew, was a thousand feet thick, and she couldn't have heard the striking of meteorites if she had been outside, within inches of where they landed. But she heard them anyway, as she had been hearing them, off and on, when she forgot *not* to hear them, for weeks. Millions of space-pebbles, some of them not pebbles, but rocks, boulders, monoliths, endlessly hitting the roof. No one had ever heard them, but Kay. She heard them, she knew, because she knew about them, because they constantly menaced Monte when he was outside, because other women had insisted they heard them. They sounded like steady rain on a composition roof, or on a tent-on-Earth.

"I am not going mad," Kay told herself softly. "I am the wife of the first Lunar-pioneer. I *can't* be going mad. It's just the always being locked up!"

"But every human being, every living thing on Earth, darling," Monte had told her

patiently, the first time she had told him of her growing fear of her escape-proof prison, "is a prisoner, a prisoner of Earth's atmosphere."

"Maybe, but did it ever feel like a prison to you, when you ran barefoot, as a boy, working *hard* to jump twelve feet, instead of cavorting eighteen feet while trying to step? Did it seem like a prison when you went on picnics with me, went fishing with your friends, went skiing in winter, dived into swimming pools. . . ."

She fought not to remember now. He had suggested then that she go back to Earth, at least until the child came, and she had vehemently refused even to consider it. She had ever since refused. But this time, when she hadn't much margin of time for decision, she would. . . .

The plastic door shot open. Monte Archer, all six feet two of him, blond hair, lighter by much than Kay's auburn, crawled like a huge reptile into the sitting room. He scrambled to his feet, took a deep breath of fresh air, opened his arms—and Kay landed in them, un-

aware of rising from the chair to meet him.

"Cat!" cried Monte.

"Rat!" cried Kay, falling in again with their private little game—which, likely enough, other wives and husbands played.

Monte held her out at arm's length, noting her motherly housedress, her comfortable old shoes, the bright ribbon in her hair.

"We're not parents yet?" he asked.

"Silly!" she retorted. "What do you expect? You've been gone just half a Moon-day."

"That would be seven days and nights on Earth," he snapped back. "Isn't that long enough for you to miss me?"

"One second," she went instantly grave, "is too long for you to be away, especially now. And when I say now I mean the *always* now."

HE sat in the easy chair in the window recess, holding her in his lap. She could feel that he was bursting to tell her of his experiences.

"Tell me, Monte," she said gently.

"You tell first, Kay," he

said. "Surely *something* has happened."

"Yes. Doc Probeck advises me to go back to Earth for hospitalization. Says he can handle it here well enough, but who wants to have the first Moon-child? I've told him to stand by to usher in that said first Moon child!"

"Maybe not, Kay," said Monte slowly. "I've been thinking. . . ."

"Even out *there* you've been thinking of me?"

"Whenever old Angus Buxton let up on us long enough to give me a chance. The old codger had himself tuned in with all our helmet radios, from Central Broadcasting in Buxton City, of course, and came in every hour on the hour with this: 'what do you see now? Any prospects? No out-croppings? See any plant life?' He'd talk to each of us separately then, as if he didn't trust any of us. Tried to use each of us as a spy on the others."

"And you're the City Manager here!"

"No subordinate is manager, really, while Old Angus lives. Some day I'm going to tell him

what he can do with his job!"

"When, Monte?"

There was a moment of stillness. Then, slowly, the big man answered his comparatively diminutive wife.

"Never, I guess, Kay. You know how I feel. The Moon is the key to all our solar system, just as our artificial satellites are keys to the Moon, were, still are. Thanks to the low escape velocity...."

"Five thousand four hundred miles an hour, compared to thirty thousand miles on Earth!" said Kay softly. "One and a half miles per second, one sixth the required speed on Earth."

"You never forget my little lectures, do you, Kay?"

"I keep them in my heart," said Kay, "and argue with them while you're away. They're all I have to talk to. I'm not complaining, just telling you."

"You're a true spaceman's wife, Kay. If wives who went back to Earth to have babies—then stayed—had had your guts...."

She put her palm over his lips. He must not be allowed to say something he would bit-

terly regret when she told him she had made up her mind not to be the first Earth Mother on the Moon. She delayed, however, for "that light" was in his eyes again.

"I'm a peaceful man," he said. "Dad was a veteran of World War Two. He knew thousands of veterans of World War One. Their talk, some I had straight, some secondhand, cured me of all desire to go to war. But I'm a realist. War hasn't ended for man, not yet. Do you realize, Kay, that German V-2 rockets, developed only as they were at the end of World War Two—they've been improved immeasurably since then—could be fired from Moon to targets on Earth, right now? Even the new ones can't bracket the Moon from Earth, not yet, but we *have* the Moon. Turn some of its craters into bombproof launching sites, and we are masters of the Earth! And that's not all: Moon is the key, a master satellite, on which all conditions are right for it to serve as steppingstone to Mars, Mercury, Venus, Pluto, Uranus, Saturn...."

"Since the Beginning it has been the Great Bottleneck," she reminded him. "Now, you and the others are expanding that neck."

"And some of us will be first on Mars, some will be first on Venus. . . ." He broke off suddenly, became very still. He had something to say that required forethought. While he marshalled his thoughts she gave thought to how she would word her decision to return home for the birth of their daughter. Minutes moved.

Kay listened to the "rain" on the distant roof, separated from this sitting room by millions upon millions of tons of rock. She knew she heard the meteorites only in her imagination. When she *really* heard them, and *believed* she heard them, it would be too late to go home. She would be mad. She shook her head; she would never lose balance.

But they were prisoners. The atmosphere of the house always whispered, always eddied as if it moved on tiptoe. Nothing was Earthian in the house, in all Buxton City, except the people. Kay wore Earthian clothes, hopelessly dated, she

was sure, much worn. Old Angus didn't grant space on his cargo spaceships for non-essentials—like clothes, furniture, food, tools. He had at first, but not since, five years ago, Monte and his men had found ways to synthesize almost everything.

"I've located ideal rocket-launching sites, Kay," murmured Monte. "We've found outcroppings of new ores we believe to be priceless. We've even found, in deep craters, pockets of atmosphere, mist, clouds. That suggests that atmosphere comparable to Earth's can, possibly, one day be pumped into Moon's gravity pull. We've surveyed the site of a new mining town. It will be called Archer City. Old Angus said so!"

He whirled on her before she could gasp her surprise.

"None of that matters, Kay," he said harshly. "It matters to me, but I'm a fanatic. It matters to old Angus because he's Scotch, the third richest man on Earth, with the yen to be the richest. It matters to me because I see something universally magnificent in mankind reaching for the stars. I'm

proud to be one of the first of the reachers. You know, since I wore my first spaceman's suit, at age six, I've dreamed of Earthmen on the planets of the solar system. The dream will come true; it must. But you're my wife, and you come first, Kay. This time I'm going to insist. You're going home for the birth of our daughter!"

KAY did not answer. Here he was, urging her to do the very thing she had been working herself up to tell him she had decided to do. It was all so easy. All she had to do was ask Monte to arrange with Old Angus for space on the next cargo ship to Earth, and the thing was done. For *months*, maybe as long as a year, she would not know what Monte did. She wouldn't be reaching out to him with her heart across the deadly dusty surface of Moon, in terror lest he die out there. Not knowing what he did, she might comfort herself that "no news is good news."

"No," she heard herself saying softly. "No, Monte! I'm staying right here. Maybe we'll

call our first child Virginia Dare!"

What made her pretend like this, she asked herself? She was trying to escape the drag of her conscience. She knew she was going back, but she could see that Monte, having made up his mind, in agony, perhaps, because he had been five years on the Moon without her—he hadn't returned home since coming out, seven years before—was determined. She would allow him to persuade her.

"I'm your husband, Kay. I know what's best," said Monte.

"You're a bouncing balloon," she chided him. "You're so wrapped up in your work I half expect you to try to crawl home with your space suit on. I'm always surprised when you reach here in your comfortable home clothes. How could you know what's best for *me*? Besides, Monte, separation does strange things, especially if the separation is by vast space. Seven Moon wives have gone back. One has returned. The others, possibly, never will. I'm here. I've been here five years. I can stand it. I'll go back only when you do."

"Then I'll throw up my job and go back with you! I'm not too keen about a Moon child. There are half a dozen men here who can fill my shoes. I haven't been homesick since you came out and married me, but I can work up a good case of it, if I give it a little thought!"

"*You* can't go back. Not ever. Not and be happy, that's certain. This is your job. You belong here. I belong with you. So does our child."

"You mean you don't want to go?" a great obvious hope was in his words, his eyes. She was not good at lying, not while he looked into her face.

"I want to go. Earth is home. But I want to stay more than I want to go." This *can't* be true, what I'm saying, she thought. I don't want to stay more than I want to go. I just want Monte with me. But half the time, even here, he leaves me alone. If I can endure it half the time, I can endure it more—on Earth. Then, when the child is born, and we return . . . but suppose there were something that made it impossible for the child to return?

Suppose Old Angus clamped down a rule: no children to the Moon! He'd been more arbitrary than that, repeatedly. But he hadn't so far gone to such lengths with his employees and their families. He hadn't had to. Women had returned home, and stayed.

"Prisoners," said Monte. "I've been a prisoner for seven years. I expect to be a prisoner the rest of my life. To go home, become acclimated, then return here to do all over again the job of becoming a Moon-man, would be just too much. Maybe that's why women haven't. . . ."

He pushed her from him, almost roughly. He stood, turned, holding her hand, and walked back out of the window recess, back into the sitting room. He looked at the familiar things, and Kay could read his mind. To him this was *home*, a refuge. It wasn't a prison. It was the big world into which he escaped from his working hours inside the space-suit. Deep rugs, atop plastic "wood", hid away the solid granite floor. Monte's hands hadn't done every bit of the work on his

home, but his mind had directed it, his hands had done enough to give him a sense of possession. And by the grace of Old Angus, Monte *owned* his home. There was even a fireplace in one end of the sitting room; but the fire in it wasn't real, unless neon lights are real.

There were "bear", "tiger", "wolf" and "buffalo" rugs scattered about. The room looked to be that of an enthusiastic sportsman. But actually no bear, tiger, wolf or buffalo rug had ever been rocketed to Moon. It had amused Monte to produce these items, so true to life, he insisted, they would have fooled real bear, tiger, wolf or buffalo. Buxton City produced such items for sale to homesick men and women who tried, because they couldn't bring home with them to Moon, to reproduce Earth on Moon. Old Angus, while they were manufactured on Moon, made a good profit on each item.

"One day synthetic items like these," said Monte, in a voice of wonder, "will produce Earthian culture on all the

planets of the sun—made right on the planets."

Kay held back her scream with difficulty. They were not *real*. They were all "moon." They were fake, phony....

But wonder, honest, sincere wonder, showed in Monte's face as he led Kay from room to room. If he remembered that Kay spent all her waking and sleeping hours in these seven rooms, he did not refer to the fact. *He* had been away. She was always a prisoner; he felt himself a free man only when he was here.

Monte, holding her hand, paused to touch the lintel of the door leading into the dining room; a door with a sill, a door that swung, a door that was a *door*! As if, amid eternal, inescapable privacy, there were any need for a door. But the wood of the door, the sill, the lintels, was a triumph for Monte and his associates. It was Moon "wood", and back on Earth Old Angus was selling it in competition with wood products still procurable on earth; selling it and coining money—from the work of Monte's hands and brains.

The dining room table, the

chairs, the silver service—which was Moon “silver”—the cups, saucers, plates, bowls, all were manufactured on the Moon, for transport to Earth. Tableware was of indestructible “china.”

“Nothing is *real*!” murmured Kay. She couldn’t help it. The words just popped out.

“To me, every bit of it is real. Steel isn’t real, or nickle, or copper, or any alloy, or any plastic, any more than are these things. And we’ve made them here, within seven years after landing! And when I started with Old Angus scientists said we wouldn’t even reach the Moon short of a century! Can’t you still feel the wonder of what we have done?”

“I can feel it, Monte,” she replied, clasping his hand even more tightly, “but I’m afraid, too. Eventually, when all worlds have been conquered, what is man going to do for his restlessness?”

“Start interplanetary wars, maybe—if he hasn’t learned anything in the last two thousand years! There’ll come a day, Kay, and our children will

see it, when Moon is just a way-station to the Universe, like a railway terminal on Earth. With the founding of Archer City we’ll have started *that*. A few more rails laid, a few more pressure cars, and we’re on our way. At the same time, I’ll be organizing the rocket-launching sites, aiming at Mars!”

Vast rebellion seethed in her.

“He’s insisting I go home,” she told herself. “But he’s doing everything he can, pulling out all the stops, to sell me on the idea of staying here, of deciding *myself* to stay here. He’s telling me, without words, how much our home means to *him*. He’s asking me, without words, if it doesn’t mean even more to *me*. Sonny, that’s no way to pin down Kathryn. The more you tear-jerk me the more my heart calls me home.”

But she couldn’t induce herself, really, to resent his technique. He was probably totally unaware that he was most effectively begging. Maybe his heart cried out. Certainly no woman could fail to respond to a man’s love, so clearly indicated.

"I can manage here, nicely," Monte said. "I managed in three rooms before you came. Now there are seven, and with you in every one of them, in spirit...yes, I'll manage. It won't be long."

SLOWLY they went through each room. To him it was home, this "house"; to her it was home only when Monte was there, though at all other times she had tried with all her heart to make it *seem* to be home.

And, if Monte feared to go back to Earth, lest he find thought of return to Moon, and re-acclimatization, unendurable, what would it be like for *her*? She had never actually become accustomed to the rabbit-warrens of Buxton City. Houses, garages, stores, barber-shops, laboratories, all dispersed, connected by tunnels through which pressure cars rumbled; homes connected by small locks through which one belly-crawled with the weight of Buxton Mountain on one's back. The mountain itself was divided into compartments, so that if one blew out, the rest had a chance of survival. It

was a dreadful way to live, in such a place, but their tomorrows, Monte kept insisting, with each new conquest, would be infinitely better.

"I'll be home," he told her now, when they had visited each room, and each had seemed, momentarily, new again to Kay because they were new to Monte after his sortie into the outside, "until you've left for Earth. There's so much to prepare before we can move a pioneer party to Archer City: a branch pressure-car line, living pressure-domes to be used by pairs until houses can be mined; food, which means installation of hydroponic tanks...."

Even the food wasn't real, she thought. She had eaten all manner of Earth vegetables and fruits, grown in hydroponic "gardens" on the surface, protected by plastics from meteorites, from the terrific heat by day, the sub-sub-Arctic cold by night. They had tasted all right, always, when she shut her eyes and pretended they came from gardens of Earth—as, secondhand, they had!—but when she remembered she felt as if they *had* to leave her

hungry for a real Earth meal.

After they had become acquainted again, they sat before their tele-screen and visited with friends in other houses, some of them miles away through the heart of the mountain. Kay shuddered. Some of her women friends actually occupied "homes" so deep in Buxton Mountain that they never saw the outside at all, as Kay did through her glass window. Oh, there were tele-screen connections, but all they showed the deepest-recessed viewers was how completely they were imprisoned.

"I'm insisting that Kay go back to New York to have our daughter, Helen," Monte said to Helen Bodine, whose husband was one of Monte's most brilliant scientists, so occupied with his work he seemed to have completely forgotten that he lived in the mountain's heart, like a mole in a shadowed garden.

"Of course she should go," said Helen promptly. "I wouldn't *think* of having a child in Buxton City, though Doc Probeck is the best doctor around. It's just.....it's.....well...."

Kay nudged Monte. Monte recovered, broke in. He had forgotten, apparently, that Helen Bodine had no children, would never bear a child.

"That's what I keep telling her," said Monte. "But you know how some women are. She thinks her place is with me, as if *I* were the baby. She insists she won't go."

Kay met Helen's direct gaze in the tele-screen. Kay had told Helen she *was* going back to New York, but that she scarcely knew how to break the news to Monte. Helen was clearly puzzled, and Kay wouldn't be able to explain while Monte was in Buxton City, for very frequently, wherever he happened to be in the city, store, shop or office, he called her to the screen for a brief visit.

Now he visited even oftener, busier by far though he was, almost boyish in his eagerness to found Archer City. Days passed, and nights—lunar days and nights—and Monte kept insisting:

"You'd better start packing. I'll be arranging transportation any day now."

"I'm all packed, Monte. You'd think my husband was

eager to get *rid* of me! It's so grand having you concerned about me, even by television, that you can scarcely blame me for putting it off. It's awfully nice, being a wife."

It's awfully nice being a wife!

It was the first thing she told him when he came crawling out the last airlock for meals or rest, an event that took place about three times each twenty four hours.

Sleeping in their bedroom, with the mountain over her head, millions of tons of it, and such darkness pressing her down as Earth-man could scarcely conceive, did not seem so bad when Monte slept beside her. If Monte had the slightest inclination to claustrophobia, he never mentioned or showed it. But when he was away, Kay weakened to the extent of keeping the lights on.

"Otherwise," she told herself, "it's like being blind in a deep mine. The darkness is thick velvet!"

Another thing: when she lay awake in darkness, alone, she could hear much more clearly the meteorite "rain" on the roof. When Monte breathed se-

curely beside her, she forgot all about the rain.

How much of her feelings, her fears, on Moon, transmitted themselves to her unborn daughter?

"On Earth," Doctor Probeck had told her, "I'd say *nothing*. I think the idea of pre-natal marking is an old wives' tale. But here on Moon, where the child was conceived, I wouldn't venture to say. My *guess* is that there'd be nothing. But *you* change, ever so little, everybody does, so"

Probeck had ended by advising her again to get back to New York for the delivery, and to stay there until the daughter—or son—had been checked in every way known to science for possible differences.

CAME a "night" when Monte returned home with a fistful of daffodils. Kay's eyes widened as she took the big bouquet in her arms, hunted for a vase, and water, in which to place them. These flowers hadn't come from Earth, though possibly the bulbs had. Did she detect something odd, something strange, in the fragrance of the flowers?

Was there something, infinitesimal but certain, different in their *appearance*?

She knew there was. Nobody could possibly *miss* noting the difference, but she hid her throat-clutching fear from Monte as she turned to thank him.

"You went to so much trouble, to synthesise flowers for me! I've been *starving* for flowers!"

"Old Angus sent them really," Monte told her. "I begged like a Dutch Uncle. I told him they were your favorites. He grudgingly gave consent for the transport of two dozen—then sent two additional dozen, as if to prove he has a heart, or something. So, thank Old Angus!"

Doctor Wilbur Probeck, whose wife had rocketed to Earth four years ago, and hadn't yet returned, came through the airlock in time for dinner. He didn't express an opinion during the delicious meal, but he kept looking at Kay. Later, he applied his stethoscope, took her blood pressure, made a blood test, and said:

"You're taking risks now,

Kay. You've dillied and dallied too long. There's a chance your child may now be born enroute. There is always a good physician aboard a passenger-rocket-ship, and I may go out myself. Harriet has been begging me to go out and return with her, and I may do it...."

Kay knew Harriet had been doing nothing of the sort, and for a moment deep sorrow for her favorite Doctor caused her to forget the significance of what he had said. If she went to New York now, in a rocket which would hit Earth's atmosphere at terrific speed, which must decelerate at a sickening rate, there might be danger!

A feeling of exaltation, as if she had planned it this way, surged through her. Even though she hadn't, much of her guilt feeling ebbed away on the instant she realized.

"Now," she said, "I *can't* go. If there is the slightest risk...."

Monte's face was a shining sun.

Doc Probeck looked glum. Maybe he'd hoped to use Kay, wife of Moon Manager, as an excuse to go out and beg his wife to return. Then he may

have welcomed a situation which spared him certain embarrassment and defeat.

As if elated by the turn of events, the child hurried. Doctor Probeck turned the Archer guest room into a maternity ward. It was, as Kay had known all along it would be, a girl, a girl with eyes as blue as corn-flowers; a girl who didn't look a bit like other girls, who wouldn't have resembled any other girl if she had been born in New York City.

Menna Archer was unique, as all children born of women are.

Probeck exulted: "Perfect!" he said. "Couldn't have been more successful in New York City's most hoity-toity Maternity Hospital. Menna, the first Moon maiden! You've paved the way to the newest thing, Kay. When the news reaches Earth you're a heroine. Moon wives on Earth will be ashamed; maybe *shamed* enough to rocket home to their husbands."

He was thinking of his own

wife, she knew, though he didn't say so.

Monte was radiant. Time after time he extended his huge hands to his un-different daughter, only to note their great size and pull them back, sheepishly, awkwardly.

"Now you'll *have* to take a trip to Earth," he told Kay, "to show Menna to her in-laws, to all Earth by television, but especially to old Angus Buxton, who'd have insisted on Angus for a name if Menna had been a boy. Now he'll claim children as a new Moon crop. Yes, you'll have to go, and soon."

But Moon, for Kay, had suddenly ceased to be lonely, or a prison. There was no explaining it, really. It just was.

"No," she said. "It's impossible."

"Impossible? Why? How so?"

"I'm amazed that you can even *think* of sending your new daughter so far from her native land!"

THE END

SLAVES OF THE TREE

by ERIC RODMAN

NOVELETTE

illustrated by BOWMAN

The Earthman colony on that new planet had interbred with the weird alien race and now it was so degraded that it was held in thrall by a strange superstition

THERE was something about the planet that Rayner did not like. He knew it immediately, as soon as he had dropped the last three feet from the catwalk of the ship to the ground. The other four members of the Examination Squad had already left the ship, and were wandering around the clearing, breathing deeply, taking in the warm, slightly sickly air of Maldonad.

Rayner stood by the edge of the clearing, looking around. He felt ill at ease, *Foolish*, he thought. *This is an A-one Earthtype planet. The Examination won't take long. Just a routine once-over.*

Ehrenfeld, the Squad head, was looking at him strangely. "You all right, Rayner?"

"Yeah, I'm okay."

"Come on, then. The charts say we're five miles from the settlement. We'd better go announce ourselves."

Rayner nodded; it was silly to stand here and search one's mind for the causes of groundless fears. This was just another colonized planet, out here in the Sixth Decant, just another world on which Earth had left some of her sons and now which had to be re-examined.

Two hundred years had gone by since the colonization of Maldonad by Earthmen. This



was the third time a Terran ship had landed on the planet's surface.

First had been the survey scoutship; the records showed that a scout team had come by Maldonad in 2614, and had marked it suitable for human colonization after the usual cursory tests.

It had taken a while to get the colony organized; in 2627, finally, a huge Colonial Force ship containing seven hundred settlers made the second landing on Maldonad. Seven hundred pioneers, volunteers to open up the new world. They were part of the great mushroomlike outward expansion of Terra to the stars. Thousands of worlds lay waiting; the stardrive had placed them within man's reach.

Colonial Force regulations called for a two hundred year period of development, in which a newly settled world was to be left strictly alone. It must develop through its own devices, with no contact whatsoever with the main stream of galactic culture. And after two centuries had passed, regulations prescribed that an

Examination Squad of five Earthmen should visit the world and certify it for admission into the Council of Worlds, if its ten generations of colonists had proved themselves worthy of admission.

Two hundred years had gone by, and in 2827 it was Maldonad's turn to undergo Examination. Mark Rayner shrugged and followed the others through the forest. It was always a tense business, making first contact with the descendants of the settlers two hundred years later.

Sometimes they forgot their heritage. Sometimes they had forgotten the fact that they were human. In his seven years as an Examiner, Rayner had seen some chilling sights on the colony worlds. He wondered about Maldonad. He had never put much faith in extra-sensory perception, but the feeling of uneasiness was too strong for him to leave entirely out of consideration.

HE caught up with the rest of the group as they wheeled the equipment through the forest path. Ehrenfeld was

in front, as a squad leader should be. He was a small wiry man with remarkable strength for his size; right now he wore the neutral blue and gray uniform of the Examination Squad, and the back of his blouse was stippled with sweat-spots. Maldonad was a warm world. The mean daily temperature, according to the records two hundred years old, was 93 degrees Fahrenheit. Right now it was closer to a hundred.

After Ehrenfeld came Bryson and Killian, the anthropologist and the biologist, a remarkable pair of opposites. Bryson was close to the retirement age of eighty, a tall withered old man with hardly an ounce of surplus flesh anywhere on his lean body. Killian was half a century younger, short, chunky, brash. They were pushing the main equipment barrow.

Behind them walked Magda Hollis, the squad's one female. Rayner eyed her appraisingly as he drew near. She was no youngster, but still attractive at thirty-five. Her specialty was sociology and political

theory. In the muggy warmth she had chosen to wear a plastifab halter and shorts that clung skin-tight to her slim body.

On the journey from Barriella, the previous world on the squad's schedule, she and Killian had been carrying on a torrid shipboard romance. But evidently Magda and the chunky biologist had had a falling-out; since making the landing on Maldonad, the two of them had ignored each other as completely as if they had been sexless androids.

Rayner matched his pace to hers and said, "Nervous?"

She glanced at him. "Why should I be nervous, Rayner? I'm not normally a nervous person, am I?"

"I didn't mean that. But I always find it an anxious moment—just before we've made contact with the people we've come to pass judgment on. It's—it's as if the planet lies hidden in a dark box, and we're shining a light into that-box, never knowing what weird thing we might find inside. You mean you never feel that way?"

Magda looked at him queerly. "Not at all. This is the sixteenth world we've visited on this tour of duty, and I haven't felt anything of the sort. Maybe someone like you, Rayner—"

He cut her off before she could make the acid comment. She always had had an acid-tipped tongue, Rayner thought. He had wondered how Killian had been able to stand the woman's biting sarcasms simply for the sake of an attractive body. *He probably gave her back some of her own medicine, finally*, he thought. *And that's why they haven't been speaking to each other.*

"On Morripar, though," Rayner said. "Finding that blood-drinking cult. *That* was a fine thing to happen to Earthmen in two hundred years, wasn't it? And the legal murders in the Wimli law-code?"

"Isolated developments," said Magda. "Only to be expected in view of the nature of those worlds. But what of it? Why be nervous?"

"Maybe I have too much faith in the human species,"

Rayner said. "Maybe it upsets me to see the strange things that sometimes happen to human beings when they're left alone on an alien world for two hundred years."

She snorted contemptuously. "*You*—having faith in the human species? Don't make me laugh too hard, Rayner. It's too hot here for laughing."

He scowled and said nothing. He despised her, and he knew that she loathed him, barely troubling to keep her hatred below the surface. It was the same with all of them. Ehrenfeld had fought unsuccessfully to keep him off the squad, when the original assignment had been made; Killian held him in open derision, while old Bryson managed to ignore him as much as possible.

The team had been together for seventeen months, now. Rayner frowned bitterly. Seventeen months while a trained ecologist served as whipping-boy for a squad of neurotics. But it would have been the same anywhere else, Rayner thought, and this was the work he was most suited for, the

work he most deeply enjoyed. He had never regretted applying for a position in the Examination Corps.

You never had to stay long on one world, in the Corps. You never had to put down roots. And that suited Rayner. As long as he could wonder from world to world, he could put up with the scorn of his teammates. At least he was free.

A jewel-bodied insect with gleaming wings flew hummingly past his nose. The thick-ranked trees of the forest seemed to be bent over from the heat. Rayner heard Killian mutter something about the humidity.

Rayner hoisted his pack a little higher on his shoulders and walked on. It wouldn't be long before they'd be reaching the Terran settlement. Tremors of nervous anticipation ran through him, and he moistened his suddenly dry lips.

THE settlers' village stood at the edge of a giant forest, in a clearing provided by nature near the mouth of a great river. The Examination Squad

paused as they came to the settlement.

Two hundred years, and an original allotment of three hundred fifty couples. By now, anywhere from two thousand to five thousand humans should be on Maldonad.

Neatly-aligned streets greeted them. There was no paving, and the design of the buildings was curiously alien, but generally the village resembled all the other villages Rayner had seen in the past year and a half of visiting colonial planets. There did not seem to be any mechanical vehicles. At the edge of the street stood a cart laden down with vegetables, and hitched to it was an alien equivalent of a draft-horse. The animal was sway-backed and scaly, with thick legs ending in splayed hooves, and bright glittering green-gold eyes. It surveyed them lazily and swished its fleshy tail from side to side.

"It looks okay," Ehrenfeld said. "Let's go introduce ourselves."

Rayner felt a twinge of nervousness as they stepped out into the quiet street. It was

midday, and the big golden G2-type sun was high overhead. None of the inhabitants were to be seen.

"Obviously they've developed the custom of taking a noontime siesta," Magda Holis commented.

"Or else they saw us coming and are hiding in their cellars," Rayner said.

Suddenly the silence was broken by the sound of footfalls. Rayner glanced across the street and saw someone—*something*—scuttling back into hiding behind the side of a house.

"What was that?" Killian demanded.

"It looked like a child," Bryson said. "But what kind of child?"

"I'll go have a look," Rayner said. No one argued with him. He hitched up his pack and crossed the broad sun-baked street.

Quietly he circled the house; then, catching sight of his prey, he darted out a quick hand and caught it. He lifted it, and stared, astonished.

It was a child, and at a distance it might have seemed to

be a human child. But, close up, the differences became apparent. Its skin was deep green and of a pebbly texture. Its high, domed head was virtually hairless. There was something froglike about the child's face, and the batrachian characteristic was fully borne out by the firm webs between each of its bare toes. As for the eyes, they were the warm, liquid green-gold eyes of the alien beast of burden.

The child wriggled, squirmed, spat curses at him in an incomprehensible tongue. Rayner struggled with it. It seemed to be about nine, and naked except for a cloth round its middle. It had a definite musky odor, unpleasant, dank, sea-like.

"Hey! Come over here and see what I found!" Rayner yelled to his companions.

But at that moment the little creature broke from his grasp, snarled defiantly at him, and dashed away at a lightning speed, vanishing rapidly in the distance. Rayner stared at his hands. They felt slimy.

Shaken, he crossed the street again. "Did you see that,

thing?" he wanted to know.

Ehrenfeld said, "What was it?"

"Some sort of alien humanoid creature. A young one, unless they're a race of midgets."

"The survey chart says there's no intelligent alien life on Maldonad," Killian remarked truculently, as if he were trying to prove Rayner a liar.

Rayner glared down at the muscular biologist and said, "Maybe the survey team was wrong. Either that or the settlers here are having some mighty peculiar children."

He rubbed his hands on his uniform trousers and shuddered. This was only the first surprise Maldonad held, he thought. But there were going to be many more, most likely.

They moved on a hundred feet further into the town, and abruptly the people began to appear. They filed out of the ramshackle old standard-type houses, tiptoeing into the hot streets, standing in tense little circles, staring at the Examination Squad, pointing, whispering, murmuring things to each other.

"Look at them!" Rayner said in horror.

Some of them looked almost human. Those were the ones with long hair, thick limbs, dark eyes. They might have been pure Terran-type humans, except for the greenish cast to their skin and the slight domed shape of their skulls. They looked different, but not alarmingly so.

There were others, though. Some of them were light green in color, almost hairless, with slim delicate bodies and human eyes. Others had the jewel-like eyes of the aliens. It was difficult to point to one of them and say, he was human, or he was an alien. They all seemed to be in a point of transition between the human and alien states. Hybrids.

Rayner's throat felt dry.

He looked around, at the webbed feet of some of them, the domed heads, the lithe bodies. Then he turned and stared at his companions.

"There *was* an alien race living here," he whispered. "And they've interbred."

Magda Hollis nodded. "Fascinating! An entirely new

species—semi-aquatic, I'd say."

"Definite genetic mingling," Ehrenfeld muttered. "And I'd say it's been going on ever since the settlers first landed."

"We'll have to report this to Earth," Rayner said. "We can't cope with this ourselves. There'll be a full investigation."

"We'll investigate first," Ehrenfeld said. "Fully, before we notify Earth."

Rayner turned on him. "Our job is to decide whether or not a planet is ready to enter the Council of Worlds, Ehrenfeld. You only need to glance around you to see that no such recommendation can be made here. We ought to pack up and get out, and have a team of specialists sent in to study whatever damnable thing has happened here."

"I'll make the decisions on this team," Ehrenfeld snapped.

A colonist detached himself from the group and walked toward the little knot of whispering Earthmen. Rayner stared at him. He was half-human, half something else, with dark reptilian skin and the face of a human being.

When he spoke, it was in a velvet-lined voice that was more a gentle whisper than anything else. His language was barely recognizable as Terran, but the two centuries had distorted and altered the inflection until it seemed some new language altogether.

"Who are you creatures? Where are you from, and what do you want here?"

"We are from Earth," Ehrenfeld said, speaking with exaggerated care. "Two hundred years have gone by since the settling of this world, and now we of Earth have returned to view your progress."

"Earth?" the Maldonadi repeated incredulously. "You are from Earth?"

"Yes."

The gentle strange eyes seemed to squint. The being turned away from them, faced the silent crowd, and spoke rapidly in what seemed to Rayner like an alien language until he realized it was only a sort of slurred distorted Terran. He caught the unmistakable final words: "They have come to us from Earth!"

Expressions of what seemed like joy spread over the crowd.

Tension melted; they grinned toothily and began to cheer. Rayner distinctly heard what they were saying. The words puzzled him.

"They are from Earth! Praised be the Tree!"

THE five Earthmen were given quarters in a large building near the center of town, which in times gone by had evidently been the community center of the settlement but which now served as a sort of hotel. Rayner was shown to a room on the ground floor. The building, like all the others in the village, was in a terrible state of repair, but none of the natives seemed to care or to apologize in any way for the shabby condition of the building. Evidently shabbiness was the norm among these strangely altered people.

Once he was settled, Rayner went out into the hall and found his comrades. Oddly, they seemed to feel none of the revulsion Rayner did. They were discussing the situation in abstract, objective tones.

"The survey team must have missed the native species com-

pletely," Killian was saying. "They reported no intelligent animal life at all, and obviously there's an unknown species of humanoid alien here."

"And there's been cross-breeding between human and alien ever since the landing," Bryson said. "The race we've encountered is hybrid, of course. They've retained their language and some of the Ter-ran customs, but the alien strain in them is becoming dominant."

"Did you hear what they were yelling?" Rayner asked. "*Praised be the Tree.*" They've developed their own religion, too."

"Or borrowed one from the natives," Magda said. "We can spend months here investigating these people, you know. We'll be famous in scientific annals forever."

Rayner shrugged. He knew it would be futile to oppose the four of them. They were determined to remain and study the settlers, and though it was a violation of regulations there was little Rayner could do if they insisted on remaining. His mind obstinately echoed with the pertinent

section from Regulations:

101a sub-two: In the event that a world's inhabitants have been found to deviate substantially from the parent stock, whether through natural mutation or any other genetic alteration, this fact is to be reported immediately to the offices of the Colonial Council. The Examination Squad will regard its work as terminated when such a world is discovered.

Obviously, thought Rayner. The job of an Examination Squad was purely and simply to live among a colonial culture for a period of a week to a month and determine whether the culture was sufficiently advanced to allow it to enter the main stream of galactic life. That meant opening the world to trade and tourism, granting them representation on the Council of Worlds.

Clearly this planet could not qualify for that. In many of the worlds Rayner had visited, there had been serious cultural deviation—as in the planet where cannibalism had become socially approved, or

in the world where ceremonial blood-drinking was commonplace. These were relatively minor deviations compared with what had happened on Maldonad. The bloodline of Terra had been mingled with alien blood, here, as nowhere else in the universe.

Rayner shrugged. If his four companions wanted to stay here and act as an investigation committee instead of as an Examination Squad, there was nothing he could do but give in gracefully. He was outnumbered.

THE next day they began their full-scale investigation into what had happened on Maldonad. The inhabitants—Rayner could not bring himself to call them “colonists” in their present state—were willing, in fact eager, to help the Earthmen in their inquiry.

The head of the village spent most of the morning with them, explaining the history of the settlement to them. His name was Smissun, he said, and that checked with something in the back of Rayner's mind.

“Have you been head of the

village all your life, Smissun?" Rayner asked.

"And my father before me, and my father's father before him, and back into the mist of days," replied the hybrid being, speaking in the soft slurred Terran the colonists used.

Rayner nodded. "That makes sense," he said to Ehrenfeld. "The original Colony Director on the 2627 ship was named Jair Smithson. Smithson to Smissun; it makes sense. Control has stayed in the same family all along."

"Tell us what you know of the early days of the colony," Magda Hollis prompted. Her stylus raced over the pages of her notebook as Smissun spoke.

"We are told we came from Earth originally," the chieftain said. "That was long ago, when we were different, when we looked like you. Before we found the Tree. Our fathers found the Tree, and chose their wives by it."

Rayner frowned. The original colonists had all been married on Earth, before they made the trip. He wondered what Smissun meant, but he said nothing.

"In the beginning there were the Earthpeople and the Forest People," Smissun said. "But the two peoples met at the Tree, and found each other good, and Earthpeople took women from Forest People and the Forest People married of the Earthpeople. And so we have lived."

And so we have lived, Rayner thought. *Hybrids.*

Many things seemed puzzling. By all accounts the so-called Forest People were alien, even repugnant to Earthpeople. And yet there had been mating between the groups, and children had been born. Rayner wondered how that could have happened.

"This Tree," Rayner said. "What is it?"

Smissun looked at him in surprise. "The Tree," he said, "is the Tree. What else could it be?"

Patently Rayner asked, "Where is it?"

Smissun pointed behind his shoulder. "In the forest. We go there once a week to worship."

"And what kind of Tree is it?"

Smissun shrugged gently.

"It is—the Tree," he said simply.

Rayner gave up. Ehrenfeld said, "There are no Earth People left among you now? None of your people looks like us?"

"Occasionally one is born with the white skin and the webless toes," Smissun said. "These do not live long. There has not been one of them grown to manhood within my lifetime, I believe."

Killian scowled. "The alien genes are dominant, then. And recessive alien genes must be lethal."

"What do the Forest People look like?" Bryson asked.

"Like us," Smissun replied. "But they are better at swimming than we are, and their faces are different."

"And when could you take us to meet the Forest People?" Rayner wanted to know.

"Soon."

"This afternoon, perhaps?"

"Oh, no," the hybrid said. "Not for four days. That is the time of the next Ceremony of the Tree, and we meet them there."

"You couldn't take us to the Tree today, then?"

"Oh, no. Not at all."

THE picture was taking shape, and it was a weird one indeed. The five Earthmen discussed it later in the day, as they transcribed their notes for permanent filing and began to form conjectures about what had taken place on the planet of Maldonad.

"The way I figure it," Killian said, "the Earth settlers got here and built the colony as per regulations. Then somebody found this Tree in the forest. It turned into a sort of trysting place where Earthmen found alien lovers and vice versa. They must have thought it was a nice gag, going out into the forest and carrying on with alien beings."

"But then the babies started to be born both in the colony and in the forest, and the settlers discovered the two races could breed true. It's a one-in-a-trillion fluke shot that two races developed on different planets could have a homogeneous chromosome pattern, but this must be the millionth shot."

"Within twenty or thirty years nearly all the new children had some degree of alien

blood in them. Gradually the hybrid race evolved, and the pure Earth-types disappeared. That's the situation now. The colonists are almost alien in form, though they've kept the language and some of the customs of Earth. And the Forest People still mate with the hybrid offspring of the old colonists."

"One thing I don't understand," Rayner said. "How could it have started in the first place? I thought all the settlers were coupled off at the start. Why should they find these fishlike humanoids more attractive than their own mates?"

"It's hard to explain to someone like *you*," Magda said biting. "Maybe they simply found the aliens more attractive than each other. You wouldn't understand such things."

"That'll be enough," Ehrenfeld said warningly. "I've told you to stop ribbing Rayner, Magda."

"Sorry," Magda muttered. But there was nothing apologetic in her tone.

Bryson said, "There won't be much we can do until they

take us to the Tree, I guess. We can make photographic records of village life in the meanwhile, anyway."

Ehrenfeld nodded. "We want to do a thorough job on this planet. I want to bring back a complete story."

Rayner stared out the window at the bright sky, thick with fleecy clouds. His original feeling of uneasiness still persisted. The thought of a race of hybrids, half Earthmen and half alien creatures, was stomach-turning. He wondered how any such thing could ever have taken place.

There was no doubt that it *had* taken place. The original Terran genetic stock had been virtually obliterated in two hundred years. In a century more, no doubt, the people of the settlement would be identical in all respects to the mysterious creatures of the forest, and only the birth of an occasional throwback, an occasional pale child without webbed toes, would remind them of their time-shrouded origin on the planet Earth.

ON the fourth day, Smissun came to them and said,

"This is the day on which we go into the forest to worship the Tree."

Rayner felt strange excitement stir him as he readied himself to make the journey out into the forest. He had kept to himself during the four days, saying little to his Terran comrades as they moved through the town, photographing, examining, recording.

It was obvious that the hybrids had not bothered to keep up the work of their remote ancestors. Many of the dwellings, Rayner discovered, were virtually falling apart. Some new ones had been built at the far end of the town, but these were of wood and of strange design. It was not hard to picture a day in the near future when all vestige of the original colonial group from Earth had been eradicated by the grotesque change that had come over the one-time Earthmen.

There was a strange hush over everything as Smissun led them through the town and out into the glades of the forest beyond the broad fast-flowing river. The entire town seemed to accompany them—several thousand people, com-

prising a genetic melange of all conceivable variations on the human form. Many of the townsfolk were utterly alien in appearance; others still had lingering signs of their Terran ancestry.

They wore their finest clothes as they made the pilgrimage—clean dark-cloth sarongs for the women, loincloths for the men. The children either were naked or wore a brief twist of cloth round their middles.

Sunday morning in Maldonad Colony, Rayner thought wildly. The whole town is turning out for services.

The forest whispered gently as they walked through the well-trodden glades. Ehrenfeld's camera clicked again and again as some bizarre broad-winged bird in flaming colors fluttered across their path, or some small alien reptile scuttled frantically into the underbrush at their approach. Rayner felt tension mount within him. *We're on our way to the Tree.*

They were following the path of the river through the forest. It was still early morning, and the sun was not at its

height; even so, the humidity was stifling. Sweat coursed down Magda Hollis' bare back, and she cursed in a barely audible undertone. She was wearing only a brief and nearly translucent plastic wrap around her hips, and had left her breasts uncovered in the heat. Rayner felt no yearning for her, and he noted with some surprise that the other men in the group had taken no more notice of her near-nudity than had she been a wax doll. He had his own reasons for not being stirred by the sight of Magda's full breasts, and old Bryson certainly could have no interest—but Killian was behaving most unlike his normal self, and Ehrenfeld seemed to have forgotten that he had once felt jealous of Killian at the time the biologist had been on good terms with Magda.

No one spoke. Smissun led the way, with his family around him and the Earthmen just behind. Then came the whole horde of villagers. In the distance, a forest beast honked thickly, and to their left the water rippled and eddied.

Suddenly Ehrenfeld pointed. "Look up there," he said in a hushed voice.

Rayner glanced up. He whistled.

Directly ahead of them, perhaps five hundred yards ahead, a tree towered over its companions. Although many of the forest trees were two and three hundred feet high, this one topped them all by more than a hundred feet. Its magnificent crest thrust high up above the the close-packed vegetation of the jungle.

There was no doubt. They were approaching the Tree.

Smissun halted and turned to face the Earthmen. There was an expression of exaltation on the hybrid's face; his large golden eyes were gleaming with joy.

"We draw near the Tree," he said. "And you will see the Forest People."

He beckoned them forward. They advanced through a clearing beaten down by the regular procession of thousands of feet over hundreds of years, and suddenly they were in the presence of the Tree. It stood alone, in a broad bare patch in the forest.

It was immense. Its top loomed high in the haze above them, four hundred, five hundred feet from the ground—perhaps even more, Rayner thought. The base of its trunk was a massive wall of wood, more than a hundred feet thick. Great branches, each of them the dimension of a normal tree, grew from its sides in radial spokes. Each branch was heavy with vast limbs, and there was an abundance of glossy green leaves. Here and there, nestling in the foliage, Rayner saw the enormous bright-red bulk of the Tree's fruit: a melon-sized fruit, bigger than a man's head.

The hybrid folk were dropping to their knees around the great Tree, falling in reverence before this monster of the forest. Rayner thought dizzily of the depth and breadth of root that must be necessary to support the bulk of a tree such as this one.

A wordless song of praise was rising from the townsfolk now. Rayner understood how humble these people must feel in the presence of the Tree. He felt like kneeling himself, almost, but remained upright.

Near him stood Magda, and not far away were Bryson, Killian, and Ehrenfeld. He glanced at his companions and saw that they, too, were overwhelmed by the magnitude of this Tree of Trees that was the god of the hybrids.

A hymn was going up, now. Rayner strained to catch the words, but it seemed that they were only partly in Terran, and mainly in some strange and alien language whose words were smooth-flowing and liquid, with many vowels and few harsh consonants.

The Earthman realized that other figures were coming from deeper within the forest—lithe, graceful figures, with nothing Earthly about them.

So these are the Forest People, he thought.

Only about twenty of them had appeared, though more seemed to lurk in the dark glades beyond. Superficially they looked humanoid; they had two arms, two legs. But their hands and feet were webbed and ribbed with spines, leaving only the thumb and great toe free for independent action. Their eyes were utterly

alien, green-gold and depthless.

They were naked. Their bodies seemed to glisten, as if they were wet from swimming; and Rayner saw gill-like processes at the sides of their jaws that seemed to indicate a semi-aquatic existence.

He saw the differences now between the hybrids and the Forest People. The hybrids were, most of them, clumsy, still laden down with their Terran genetic heritage. The Forest People bore themselves with animal-like grace, and there was a sleek beauty to them that made Rayner understand how the original settlers might have come to mate with them.

The ranks of the Forest People increased now, and they too knelt, joining their hybrid cousins in worship of the great Tree. Rayner glanced around the clearing.

His eyes fell on Magda Hollis. The sociologist stood as if frozen, staring at one of the male Forest People. Her eyes were wide, and her breasts rose and fell irregularly with her disordered breathing. She

seemed almost to quiver with desire.

The alien song of praise to the Tree rose to an almost numbing crescendo of sound. Rayner watched unbelievably as Magda moved on unsteady feet toward the little group of Forest People.

Horror swept through him as he watched. She sank to her knees next to one of the alien creatures, and from her mouth came a wordless song that blended strangely with the hymn to the Tree.

THE Ceremony ended some time later, and Earthmen and hybrids made their way back through the now-steaming jungle to the village. The Forest People slipped away, silently as they came, into the darker recesses of the jungle that lay on the far side of the Tree.

Rayner walked by himself, too shocked and disgusted to seek the company of his fellow Examiners. Vivid in his mind was the image of Magda Hollis kneeling next to the sleek moist-skinned alien, her eyes turned toward the being in adoration and lust.

It was the way the hybridization had originally begun, he thought. The sudden quick hot burst of desire at first sight, when Earthman sees alien. It was incomprehensible and vaguely obscene, but there was no denying it had happened.

He wondered if the men of the group had felt the same way about the alien women. He knew that, for his own part, he had found them unattractive, though they were handsome in an exotic sort of way. But he was no judge of such things; and there was no telling what lures Killian or Ehrenfeld might respond to.

He looked at Madga as she walked alone thinking secret thoughts, with a strange smile on her lovely face. Deliberately he came to her side of the path and moved alongside her.

"You're very quiet," Rayner said.

"Thinking."

"May I ask?"

"No," she said.

He grinned amiably. "You were doing some sociological research at that Ceremony, weren't you?"

Her hand came up like a rising sword; Rayner saw it

come, but allowed the blow to land anyway. It raised an area of stinging redness along his left cheek.

"What I do is my business," she snapped. "And if you make another remark like that—"

She left it unfinished, but there was dark malice in her tones.

Back at their quarters, Rayner sought out Ehrenfeld and said, "Did you see how Magda behaved at the ceremony this morning?"

"What do you mean?"

"The way she crossed over to those aliens and practically fawned over the one on the end?"

Ehrenfeld's tanned, leathery face displayed no sign of any emotion. In a quiet voice he said, "I saw it. What am I supposed to say?"

"You mean you don't object to what she's up to?"

Ehrenfeld shrugged. "She's a free individual, Rayner. If she happens to find that alien interesting, there's no way I can prevent her doing anything about it. You'll have to learn to mind your own business."

Rayner took a deep breath. He stared bewilderedly at the

squad chief, trying to read the unfathomable expression in the smaller man's face, wondering if this were really happening or whether it were some drug-induced nightmarish hallucination.

Finally he said, "You don't seem to get my point. Magda's an *Earthwoman*. You don't object to the fact that she's obviously falling in love with an alien being?"

The corner of Ehrenfeld's mouth quirked impatiently. "An entire colony of Earthmen did just that thing two hundred years ago, Rayner. Why should I complain if Magda decides to do the same thing?"

"Because it's insane and disgusting, that's why!" Rayner burst out. "Because space knows what kind of alien traits are being mingled into Terran blood! Because—" He stopped. There was obviously little point in arguing with Ehrenfeld, or with any of them.

One of the cardinal rules of Terran civilization was that bloodlines had to be preserved. Man's genetic-heritage was the product of centuries of selective breeding; it was not lightly to be destroyed.

Stringent laws prevented undesirable marriages. Sickly genes were weeded out of the species. The insane, the unfit, the hereditarily deficient—these were forbidden to breed, by laws harsh to the individual but kindly in the light of the overall future of the race. A new Earthman was emerging, healthier, wiser than ever before.

What the Maldonad colony had done, what Magda Hollis was now doing, was ten times more dreadful than mere violation of the eugenics laws. Alien blood, alien genes, mingled with those of Earth—Rayner's mind rebelled at the thought. It was inconceivable.

Yet these four fellow Earthmen of his did not seem to object at all. It was as if, thought Rayner, they were under the influence of some strange compulsion, utterly outside themselves.

TWO days went by; days in which the group of Earthmen continued their researches, each along their own specialized lines. Rayner surveyed the district, preparing his

ecological report. Bryson and Magda operated as a unit, studying the hybrid people from sociological and anthropological viewpoints, analyzing the strange culture that had sprung up in this one-time Terran settlement. Killian ran biological tests; Ehrenfeld worked ceaselessly as the squad coordinator, preparing the unified report that would be submitted upon their return to Earth.

On the third day since the ceremony of the Tree, Rayner noticed that Magda was behaving peculiarly. She seemed tense and high-strung, irritable, fidgety; she continued to stare at her wristwatch, as if the day could not pass fast enough for her.

Rayner wondered what was on her mind. She spent half the day primping and fussing, as if she had an extra-special date that evening; as if—he went stiff in sudden alarm—as if she were going to meet a lover.

He decided to speak to Killian.

The blocky-built young biologist was working in his improvised lab when Rayner en-

tered. Killian was bent over his microscope, adjusting the viewing stage, groping out with one hand for his tray of specimens, and scribbling notes every time he had a free hand available.

Rayner paused a few moments at the door, not wanting to interrupt anything. But Killian remained busily at work, and it became apparent to Rayner after a while that he was deliberately being ignored.

He cleared his throat. "Killian?"

"That you, Rayner?"

"Yes. Could I have a couple of words with you now?" Rayner said.

Without looking up the biologist muttered, "I'm pretty busy on these trypanosome slides, Rayner. You think you could come back in a little while—tomorrow afternoon, some time?"

Rayner's jaws tightened. In a level voice he said, "I want to talk to you about Magda, Killian. And I don't want to wait till tomorrow."

Reluctantly Killian shut off the illumination for the microscope and restored his slide to

the nutrient chamber. He pushed his sheaf of notes to one side, swivelled in his chair, and looked up at Rayner with an expression of sour impatience.

"Well?"

"You and Magda were pretty friendly aboard the ship coming out, weren't you?"

Killian frowned. "Maybe. What's it to you?"

"Nothing much. I was just thinking that the two of you must have had some sort of fight lately, the way you've been ignoring each other."

The biologist drummed on the desktop. "I'm not married to the girl, you know. What happened on shipboard was just a shipboard romance. Over. Kaput. I have no more interest in that girl than I do in old Bryson, at the moment. But you didn't come here to talk gossip with me, did you? You can clear out if that's all that was on your mind. I'm too busy to—"

"Magda's in love with one of those alien beings," Rayner interrupted suddenly. "She's going to go out to the forest tonight and meet him—it?"

He thought it would be a

bombshell, but Killian hardly seemed to react at all.

"So?"

"So? Killian, doesn't it mean anything to you to know that a girl you've loved is meeting an alien being in the forest and—and—" Rayner stopped. "I guess I must look like an awful busybody to you people."

"You do," Killian agreed coldly.

"It isn't because I give a damn about your love life, or Magda's," Rayner burst out bitterly. "It's just that it makes me sick to think of these hybrids...and Magda going to produce another one. How could anyone possibly want to get that close to one of those things?"

For the first time an expression appeared on Killian's face. An expression of pity for Rayner.

"How could anyone possibly *not* want to?" Killian asked in astonished tones.

"You mean—you too—"

A smile of joy appeared on the biologist's swarthy face. "There's one of them out there, a slim little girl I saw at the Tree last week—and Ehrenfeld

has his eye on one too. Even old Bryson says he wishes he was younger, so he could have one. And you, Rayner? It makes you *sick*?" Killian shook his head. "You poor pathetic thing. I don't think I've ever felt sorrier for you than right now. I wondered why you stood like that the other day at the Tree, stiff and bored-looking. Now I know, Rayner. You just weren't responding. You poor creature."

Rayner had had enough. He glanced puzzledly at Killian, shrugging, and said, "So you're in love with an alien too, eh? And Ehrenfeld? I guess I'm wasting my breath, then. I guess I might as well get out of here."

He opened the door and stared once more at Killian before closing it. The biologist's face still wore that calm expression of deep compassion.

IN his room that night, Rayner lay on the straw pallet the hybrids had provided for him and stared upward at the striated pattern of veining that had formed in the ceiling where the ancient paint was starting to crack and crumble.

He had retired early, but he was unable to sleep. Instead he revolved the situation round wearily in his mind, examining it from all angles, trying to make it make sense.

His four companions had been normal Earthmen until the landing on Maldonad. He was fairly sure of that. He had spent seventeen months with them, and during that time none of them had revealed any unnatural urges, none of them had shown any strange predilections or bizarre personality traits.

Until landing here. And here on Maldonad three hundred and fifty supposedly normal men and three hundred and fifty allegedly normal women, all of them hand-screened and specially approved for colonization by the rigid classification system of the Colonial Force, had given themselves up to the aliens as lovers and had produced a strange semi-human race of hybrid beings.

It made no sense, Rayner thought.

It made no sense—unless one postulated the existence of some intangible force that had brought about the grotesque

intermingling of the races.

What was it Killian had said about his behavior at the Tree? *I wondered why you stood like that the other day at the Tree, stiff and bored-looking. Now I know, Rayner. You just weren't responding.*

You just weren't responding, Rayner thought. Responding to what?

Immediately his trained mind gave him a plausible answer: responding to some psychic force, perhaps thrown out by the Tree, which urges the species to mate with each other.

It was biological nonsense, Rayner thought. But yet he had seen the neat classifications of biology—*Terran* biology—overthrown on half a dozen worlds before. There had been strange beasts, half animal half plant, with green chlorophyll surging in their veins. Those had been on the planet Legba, roaming the deserts of nitrogen-sand and feeding omnivorously. And there were the spider-beasts of Riyell, which metamorphosed weirdly, passing through amphibious and reptilian stages before reaching their final

pseudomammalian forms.

Evolution had unrolled simultaneously on hundreds of worlds. The cosmos had played many tricks, made many experiments with the life force. And perhaps here on Maldonad, a sentient Tree, brooding over the forest like a rooted titan, sending out psi pulses which affected all within its reach, all except Rayner himself.

Yes, he thought. It makes sense. It makes a crazy sort of sense.

HE rolled over, trying to sleep. The sound of a door opening further down the hall echoed for a moment, and he sat up, frowning. Everyone had long since turned in. Lights were out. There was no reason why—

Magda.

He recalled immediately; the primping, the fussing. Her impatience.

The hour of rendezvous had come.

Silently Rayner rose from his cot and drew some clothes on. He had to see for his own eyes, confirm what he already knew to be a foregone fact.

Stealthily he slipped out into the hall just in time to see the slim figure of Magda, still clad in her sleeping wraps, vanishing at the end of the corridor, turning to go down the stairs.

Rayner followed along the corridor. He paused in the dark; there was a window at the head of the stairs that looked out over the front of the building. Quickly he snapped the release-catch; the window sprang open.

Cool strange-smelling Maldonad night air flooded in. He thrust his head out. He heard low voices.

Magda had appeared at the building. There was someone with her, someone who had been waiting in the shadows, someone who had advanced out of the darkness to meet her. Rayner heard them talking.

The other spoke in liquid alien accents.

He watched as they melted together in a tight embrace; then the alien being took Magda by the arm, gestured, led her away. They strode rapidly down the deserted village streets together, heading for the border that separated forest from settlement. With

straining eyes Rayner watched as long as he could, until the pair vanished into the moonless darkness at the end of the road.

He turned away. Magda had gone to meet her lover. There was no doubt about it, now.

THERE were only four Earthmen when the time came to eat the morning meal. Killian, Bryson, Ehrenfeld, and Rayner. They ate quietly. No one seemed to comment on the fact that Magda was not among them this morning, and by this time Rayner knew better than to raise the question. He ate quickly; he was not hungry. As soon as he could he left the company of his fellow Earthmen and settled down to his day's work.

He worked listlessly, unable to concentrate. The idea of an intelligent tree troubled him, almost frightened him. He pictured the vast thing rooted there in the forest, sending out its emanations.

Magda did not return from the forest. No one mentioned her name. The day slipped by slowly. Groups of the hybrids collected from time to time out-

side the building that served as the Examination Squad's headquarters, staring at the Earthmen strangely. They almost seemed to be smiling encouragingly.

A second evening Rayner stared at the ceiling and heard sounds in the hallway; a second time he rose from bed to follow the footsteps down the hall, and a second time he peered from the landing window.

He saw the thick-bodied form of Killian down below. Killian—with a native woman who looked like a forest sprite. The two of them vanished into the darkness of night.

Two gone. Two more converts for the Tree.

Breakfast was an oddly subdued meal that morning, with only Ehrenfeld and Bryson and Rayner there. Bryson said little, Rayner nothing. Ehrenfeld spoke briefly of some plans he had.

When the meal was over Ehrenfeld turned to Rayner and said, "Would you stop into my office for a couple of moments, Rayner?"

Rayner shrugged and fol-

lowed the squad leader down the hall. They turned in at the entrance to Ehrenfeld's office.

Lying on the leader's bed was a neatly printed slip of paper. Ehrenfeld scooped it up.

"I'd like you to take the day off and return to the ship, Rayner. I want you to transmit this message back to Earth for us."

Rayner smiled apologetically. "Killian is officially the signal officer," he said.

"Killian isn't here. You know how to operate the sub-radio transmitter, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then you'll do so. The message is to be transmitted to the main Colonial Force office, and you're to wait until you have an acknowledgement. Read through the message now and let me know if there are any questions you want to raise."

He handed the paper to Rayner, who took it and read the brief message through quickly. When he was finished, he stared at the squad leader.

"You intend to send *this*?"

"Of course. Is something wrong?"

Rayner's hands trembled a bit. He said, "It's—it's a recommendation that the planet of Maldonad be admitted into the Council of Worlds at once, with full representation on a parity status." He shook his head. "That means opening of galactic trade routes between Maldonad and the other worlds, and sending of delegates from here to Earth, and tourist travel—"

"I'm well aware of what I've written there," Ehrenfeld snapped crisply.

"You can't be, sir! How could those half-civilized hybrids send a delegate to the Council of Worlds? How could there possibly be any trade between a non-industrial tribal culture like this and the civilized words of the galaxy? Pardon me, sir, but this message doesn't make any sense at all. This world is the least qualified for admission of all those I've ever seen."

Ehrenfeld glared coldly at him for a moment. Scowling, he said, "Mister Rayner, I order you to return to the ship and transmit the message to Earth. Do I understand that you're defying my order?"

Rayner considered. Defiance of the squad leader was mutiny—punishable, if Ehrenfeld so chose, by immediate execution. The squad leader was fingering the blaster at his belt.

Finally Rayner nodded reluctantly. "All right," he said in a hoarse voice. "Order accepted."

IT was a five-mile trek from the colonial settlement through the forest to the clearing where the Examination Squad ship had come down. Rayner set out almost immediately, bearing a light pack and Ehrenfeld's message.

It was a warm day, even for Maldonad. Flies buzzed round him as he walked. Ground-lizards ran daringly up to his feet, darted out their scarlet triforked tongues, and scurried away toward safety. After half an hour, he saw the slim greenish-blue needle that was their ship, standing erect, glittering brightly in the hot mid-morning sunlight of Maldonad.

Moving mechanically, he covered the remaining distance to the ship, sprung the hidden lever that lowered the catwalk, climbed up the metal

ladder into the entry hatch fifty feet above the ground. The hatch door slid hissing and closed behind him.

He made his way toward the signal compartment.

The subradio set occupied nearly one entire wall of the compartment. Its pilot light glinted redly, indicating that the set was ready for use at any time. With shaking fingers, Rayner began to set up the pattern of balanced forces that would hurl Ehrenfeld's message across the light-years to the sensitive trans-space receptors on the dome of the Colonial Forces building in Geneva, on Earth.

He stopped.

Briefly conflict swirled in his mind. He had been trained to loyalty; it was more than a pattern of action for him, it was a way of life. He had never even so much as thought of countermanding an order given by a superior officer before.

But this was different. The superior officer was insane.

The pertinent section of the Regulations drifted into his mind:

14b sub-three: When a commanding officer is

rendered unable to serve by virtue of disease or other impedance, his place shall be taken by the officer of next highest rank. Orders given by such a commanding officer during his period of disability are to be considered null and void unless counter-signed by the acting commanding officer who has replaced him.

Rayner drew from his pocket the text of Ehrenfeld's message, unfolded it, and read it through once again. Only a madman could have written such a message, he thought. A madman—or one who was under some external influence.

Such as that of the Tree.

There was little doubt in his mind of what he should do. It was impossible to transmit the message as it stood. Ehrenfeld's object had clearly been to bring more Earthmen to Maldonad, where they too might fall under the influence of the Tree. Rayner knew he would have to block any such thing from happening.

With unquivering fingers he completed the connection and waited for Earthside to re-

spond with the acknowledgement. After a moment it came: the pattern of buzzes that meant, *We read you, go ahead.*

Rayner lifted the code microphone to his lips. "I'm speaking from the ship *Examiner Eleven*, landed on the planet Maldonad as part of our examination tour. I wish to report that the other four members of my team have fallen victim to a strange alien sentient vegetable life-form."

In quick, terse sentences he explained what had happened to the original colony planted on Maldonad, and then outlined the behavior of Magda and Killian during the past several days. He finished by reading the text of Ehrenfeld's message in the light of conditions on Maldonad. He then offered his conclusions about the nature of the Tree, and added a warning that further investigations on Maldonad were to be considered only with great precautions.

Finally he said, "That sums it up. I'll try to broadcast again tonight if I get the chance. Over. Out."

He rose. Now Earth had the full report. But there remained

one thing for him to do, to make sure that no Earthmen fell prey to the Tree ever again. He left the signal compartment and headed back through the spaceship's narrow companionway to the weapons compartment.

Dust covered the racks of weapons. An Examination Squad only rarely made use of the arsenal it carried. Rayner looked around the storeroom until he found what he wanted: the flamethrower. Not even the Tree could stand up to the deadly neutron barrage of the flamethrower for long.

Cradling the bulky weapon in his arms, he made his way down the catwalk again and into the forest. It was past noon. Birds sang cheerfully.

By nightfall things would be different on Maldonad, he thought. After I've destroyed the Tree.

BY the time he reached the village, the sun had begun to dip toward the horizon, and there was the first faint chill of night in the air. Goggle-eyed, the chattering hybrids stared at him as he walked down the wide street carrying

the neutronic flame-thrower.

He entered the building where the Earthmen had been quartered, and put a cupped hand to his lips.

"Ehrenfeld?"

A moment passed; no response came. "Ehrenfeld?" he called again. "Killian? Bryson?"

Still no reply. "Magda? Are you in there? Is anybody in there?"

An alien voice at his elbow said softly, "The other Earthmen are in the forest. Why are you not in the forest with them?"

Rayner turned and saw Smissun. "A good question," he said. "I guess I'll go to the forest right now. I'll go join my friends."

"They have been worried about you. You did not yield to the Tree."

Rayner nodded. "That's all over with, now. I feel the Tree calling. I must go."

Smissun pointed to the flamethrower and said, "What is that?"

"An offering for the Tree," Rayner said curtly.

He found the forest path that led down by the river to-

ward the Tree, and followed it. After a while the great bulk of the Tree became visible above the treetops. Rayner felt a little quiver of apprehension.

There's nothing to be afraid of, he told himself. The Tree's big, but it can't move. It can't defend itself. And I don't feel its radiation.

He moved on through the noisy forest.

Fifteen minutes later he was at the edge of the clearing of the Tree; he looked about warily, not wanting to run into any of the aliens until he had done what he intended to do. He eyed the monster speculatively. It would take at least ten minutes of full-power thrust to cut completely through that vast trunk.

He moved round the Tree, calculating angles for the job of felling the great thing. Finally he was satisfied; he would make a small cut on one side, then one on the opposite side, and so maneuver things that the Tree fell sideways into the river.

A press of a lever released the tripod on which the flame-thrower rested. Rayner settled

down comfortably behind it. It was no problem to center the huge trunk in the weapon's sights, and he adjusted the thrust controls with cool hands.

Just press the stud, he thought. A picture sprang to his mind, of red atomic flame leaping from the shielded muzzle of the thrower, of the bark and sap and wood of the ancient Tree melting away before the impact, of the mighty old giant toppling defenselessly. *All I do is press the stud.*

He jabbed down on the firing key. A tongue of flame burst forth, ripped into the side of the Tree. It seemed to him that a voiceless scream of agony echoed in the forest, soundless, just a shivering impulse of pain radiating from the wounded tree. He prepared for a second burst.

"Rayner!" a voice shouted suddenly.

He glanced up and saw Killian coming toward him over the clearing. There was a wild, ragged expression in the biologist's eye. Rayner cursed; he might never get the job done now.

Springing up from the

flamethrower, he ran to meet Killian's attack. The biologist was nearly a foot shorter than Rayner, but broad and muscular; thick hands grasped Rayner's wrists, and he struggled to break loose.

Foam was dripping from Killian's lips. His face was pale and almost inhuman. Rayner wrestled with him, swung him around, fought to hurl him to the ground. Killian hung on viciously.

Suddenly Rayner managed to break his hold; he swung Killian aloft, threw him crashing to the ground. The biologist rolled over dizzily without getting up. Rayner whirled. A great gaping hole had appeared in the side of the Tree; if only he could finish the job before any of the others—

Too late.

They were all around him suddenly, Magda and Ehrenfeld and even withered old Bryson, and as if in response to unvoiced commands from the wounded Tree they were surging in frenzied activity.

"Murderer . . . vandal..." Magda cried, in hasty gasps, as she assailed Rayner, raking her nails down the side of his

face, ripping away flesh. He struggled to get past her, to reach the flamethrower.

Bryson was crouched over it, efficiently ripping away the connecting chambers, tearing up the delicate sighting mechanism, prying the thrower apart and rapidly turning it into so much junk. Killian stirred and scrambled to his feet. Ehrenfeld, eyes raging maniacally, advanced on Rayner and seized his arms.

"You're all crazy!" Rayner cried. "That Tree—it's got you under control! Can't you understand it?"

Laughing hideously, Bryson hurled fragments of the shattered flamethrower at Rayner. In a cold inhuman voice Ehrenfeld said, "You didn't respond to the Tree, and so you tried to destroy it. But the Tree warned us! We got here nearly in time. Plenty of time to save the Tree."

"No," Rayner shouted frantically. "You're human beings! This is all wrong!"

"Wrong?" Magda screamed. "You—you *android*! A synthetic man sent along because the law forced us to take you, a laboratory thing without

emotions or feelings—and you tell us we're human?"

Rayner saw that a crowd had gathered—alien and hybrid alike, come to see the desecrator of the Tree punished. They were chanting wordlessly now, a frenzied and wild song of vengeance.

He realized that this was the finish—but at least he had warned Earth. He had done that much. *And if I hadn't been an android?* he thought, as they seized him and tied his limbs together. *If I had been naturally born like these, I'd be a slave of the Tree myself now. But I warned Earth.*

"I didn't send your message," he told Ehrenfeld. "I warned Earth what the Tree was. I told them you'd all become enslaved by it. They'll be here with bombs, Ehrenfeld. They'll destroy your precious tree."

But there was no use talking to them; the frenzy was on them, and they could not hear. Rayner struggled in vain as they bore his pinioned body toward the Tree, laid him on one mighty root that was wider than a man's body. They were dancing around him now,

alien and hybrid and Earthman, singing joyfully. He saw a barbed knife glinting in Ehrenfeld's hand.

He wasn't afraid of death. How could he be, when he was an android, a synthetic creature that had never truly lived? He closed his eyes and waited. The Colonial Force knew what it was doing when it required one android to be included in each Examination Squad, he thought. He would die, perhaps, but no more Earthmen would become slaves of the Tree.

He opened his eyes and saw Ehrenfeld poised above him for the death-stroke. The one-time squad leader looked more like a beast of the forest than like an Earthman now. Rayner managed a smile.

"Praised be the Tree!" Ehrenfeld cried.

The knife came down. "Praised be the Tree!" They were the last words Rayner heard, before he found out what it was like to die.

THE END

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LOOK TO THE STARS

by SCOTT NEVETS

A light amplifier called the Cat Eye will shortly be used to investigate the "canals" of Mars and other troublesome unanswered problems of astronomy. The Cat Eye, developed jointly by Westinghouse and RCA for the Air Force, can see a scene at night and reproduce it with daylight brightness when even the human eye can see nothing.

Up to now conventional photographs of heavenly bodies taken with even the best telescopes have suffered from jitters caused by the shimmering of Earth's atmosphere.

The Cat Eye will reduce exposure time by a factor of 16,000 and minimize the blurring effect of Earth's atmosphere on lengthy exposures.

It contains a transducer which collects photons with great efficiency; it is especially sensitive in the red and near infrared portions of the spectrum, which are most suitable

for observations of planets.

A newly-discovered chemical catalyst may make possible rockets that will drive themselves indefinitely on oxygen captured in the upper atmosphere consists of molecular oxygen, each molecule composed of two atoms in the element. However, in the region sixty to seventy miles above the earth, the sun's ultraviolet rays split molecular oxygen into single atoms.

The new Air Force-developed catalyst would cause the recombination of the atomic oxygen in the upper air into molecular oxygen, resulting in the release of great amounts of energy.

The rocket equipped with proper fuel-using mechanism could circle the earth almost indefinitely in the sixty-mile-high zone, making use of the energy released by the recombination of atomic oxygen.

SPECIAL APTITUDE

by R. H. HARDWICK

illustrated by ORBAN

The dread Invaders from an unknown world beyond the stars demanded a quota of Earthmen as their tribute. Why did they want them? — Did they use them as food?

FREDRIC Peters wondered, at the strangest times, if perhaps the coming of the Invaders hadn't brought about too great a change in his life. Before the alien space-ships had come and taken over the Earth he had been just an average man, a good engineer with a good job. Of course, he was still a good engineer and he had an even better job. Fredric Peters' trouble was of a different and more serious nature. His trouble was *women*.

"It's terrifying, isn't it, Fredric?" the girl said, her voice low and tremulous.

"Eh? What did you say, Anna?" he said, the web of his

thoughts broken too abruptly.

The girl turned, the orange glow of the crumbling embers smoldering in her green eyes. "The name's Shirley," she said. Then she turned her eyes up toward the broad skylight of the penthouse. "Up there. It's terrifying." She gave a little shudder and picked up her cocktail glass.

Fredric let his arm glide round her waist. "Just that," he said, "or what's *up* there?"

They were silent for a while, seated on the thick bear-skin rug before the great fireplace of Fredric's penthouse apartment, gazing up at the night. The black void, limitless, blinking stupidly with



cold, dry pinpricks of starlight. Was it from one of these, one of these he could *see*, that the Invaders had come, Fredric wondered. How long ago had it been? Five years? Seven...?

He felt the girl shiver and draw closer to him. It *was* terrifying, when you got right down to it. He recalled that first day when the huge, ungainly-looking ships had suddenly appeared all around the globe. All defenses—rockets, atomics, everything—had proven powerless against the invaders. Theirs had been a bloodless victory. They allowed Earth to pour out its arsenals impotently, had hovered in the stunned silence of the aftermath, and, finally, had made their demands.

It was not the demands themselves that caused the initial disbelief, but rather the way in which they were presented. There had been no landing party from the strange fleet as had been anticipated by the World Defense Council of the U. N. The demands had been presented by *thought*. Suddenly, thoughts crystalized in the minds of millions of per-

sons—men and women—simultaneously. Engineers and draftsmen went straight to their drawing boards, detailed plans for replacement parts for the hovering fleet clear in their minds. Production men waited at their doors for these plans. Farmers began growing huge quantities of vegetables with a high phosphorus content.

And certain men of unquestioned integrity began assembling the machinery for the strangest conscription in human history. That was the final, and most terrifying, of the Invaders' demands—their demand for human beings.

"What do they do with the numbers, Fredric?" Shirley asked. 'Numbers' were what the people had come to be called whose numbers were drawn in the draft.

"Well, in the U. S. District, they take them out in busses to the Mohave Desert. Out there there's a big concrete building, something like a prison, with thousands of padded rooms in it. They put them in the rooms, one number to the room, and lock them in. The busses go back to the city

and the next time they take numbers out—" he shrugged "—the building is completely empty and waiting."

"It's—it's *horrible!*" she said. "But what happens to them after that?"

Fredric took his briar from the coffee table, stuck it in the corner of his mouth, and slowly sucked the flame of a match down into the bowl. He shook the match out thoughtfully and tossed it into the embers. Aromatic blue smoke billowed up around his face. "No one knows. At least, no one is *certain*. It seems obvious to me that the Invader ships come down and pick them up. After that, your guess is as good—or as *bad*—as mine."

"Fix me another drink, Fredric. It gives me the willies just thinking about it!"

He took her glass, drained his own, and got up to make fresh martinis. "It's something that's hanging over all of us, honey. Our numbers could be called, well, tomorrow."

He made it sound so impending that the girl shuddered. Fredric handed her the drink and resumed his seat before the fire. This had been

the key to the change that took place in Fredric Peters after the Invaders had come. This was the thing that had changed a mild, temperate young man into a satyr of the wildest sort. His attitude became fatalistic, his philosophy one of live-it-up-now-for-tomorrow-y o u r-number-might-be-drawn.

He had taken a penthouse atop the city's swankiest hotel. Every dime he made went directly into his current expenses. Every night he had a different girl. On many occasions he narrowly averted disaster when he inadvertently made dates with two or more for the same time. On most mornings at his office, it would be ten or eleven o'clock before he could rouse himself from the lethargy caused by the previous night's activities and get down to work.

But it was living, Fredric reasoned, regardless of the costs.

He finished his martini, idly stirred the embers in the fireplace, and took the girl's hands in his own. "One never knows what tomorrow brings, Shirley," he said. "That's why we have to live now, while we

can. *Really* live." He looked at her with such intensity from the depths of his blue eyes that, almost hypnotically, she drew nearer.

"Now, Shirley, *now*..." he whispered hoarsely as she came quickly into the circle of his arms.

"**A**S usual, you look like the very devil," Billy Coates said as Fredric slumped at his desk.

That sums it up perfectly, Fredric thought, because I feel like hell. After he had seen Shirley out of the apartment the previous night at 1:00 a.m., with a moist kiss and murmured promises to call, Jan, of all people, had called from the lobby below. The rest of the night had been filled with tearful entreaties, declarations of undying love, and everything except sleep. Seven o'clock found the beautiful redhead at last asleep and Fredric staggering to the shower.

He tried to ignore Coates, but his friend would not go away, instead, perching himself jauntily on the edge of Fredric's desk.

"There's another drawing today," Billy Coates said. "A *big* one. Notification will be tomorrow."

Fredric looked up. "I didn't feel it. How do you know?"

"I doubt if you could feel much of anything right now," he laughed, looking at the heavily-bagged eyes of his friend. "Actually, I didn't feel it either. I think the Invaders are directing the thoughts more now. Causes less confusion that way. This was in the morning paper. I suppose they're shooting the draft thoughts direct to the Drawings Committee."

Fredric fished his briar from the side pocket of his jacket with shaking fingers. "Well, what the hell, the odds are still good."

"Maybe so," Coates said, "But I understand they're going in for certain trades this time. Maybe engineers," he added with a leer, which, though it was meant to, did not distract from his own nervousness.

"The way I feel, I'd just as soon see my number come up this time," Fredric said, dropping his face into cupped

hands. He looked up again. "If they want certain trades, then that proves they're not *eating* them, doesn't it?"

The theory that the numbers were used as food for the Invaders had gained much momentum of late.

"Maybe. M a y b e not," Coates said.

"You think maybe engineers taste better than bookkeepers?" Fredric snapped.

"Wouldn't be knowing," Coates smiled. "Haven't tasted a bookkeeper lately."

Fredric groaned and headed for the automatic coffee machine.

"Tough night, huh?" Coates asked sympathetically.

"One of the toughest," Fredric said. "Habit's a funny thing. I believe I was better off the way I was living before those damned space freaks came here!"

"Everybody was, not just you."

"I don't mean the involuntary part. I mean the changes I made *myself*. That damned penthouse! All those—those *women*!"

Coates looked startled, then began to laugh. "Well, sir, I

thought I'd heard everything!"

Coates meandered back to his own office and Fredric set about his work. It was at the coffee dispenser—his fourth trip—that Anna accosted him.

"You haven't forgotten our date tonight, have you Freddie baby?" she gave him a meaningful look, one that would have curled his toenails in days gone by. "I'll be at your place at eight, lover-boy," she smiled and walked away. Fredric watched the retreating figure with no show of enthusiasm.

THE day dragged on, with Fredric feeling progressively better, at least physically. He rode the subway home and his manservant, Suki, opened the door for him.

"*Kon-ban-wa, Fredric-san,*" the Japanese hissed, smiling.

"Huh?" Fredric said. "Oh, hi, Suki. Say, Miss uh—well, whats-her-name, is coming here tonight. Better fix something to eat for about eight-thirty. You can have the evening off after that."

The servant nodded and departed. Fredric slumped into

his chair before the fireplace. It had been freezing cold in the subway and on the street and the blaze caressed him comfortingly. Suki came in silently and deposited a glass in Fredric's hand. Mechanically, he sipped the highball. He still felt tired from the night before and here he was starting out again. Vaguely, he looked up through the skylight. The winter sky was darkening rapidly. High above he saw the familiar streak-path of an Invader ship. As he watched it, thoughts of the day's drawing crept through his mind. The numbers were already drawn. Who were they? Maybe one was he, Fredric Peters. Why not?

"Hello, sweet. All alone and lonely?" a voice said near his right ear. He turned. Shirley stood behind him. Quickly, he looked past her at the little ship's clock in the bookcase. Seven-twenty. He had to get rid of her, and in a hurry.

"How did you get in? I mean—" he started.

"Don't you remember the key you gave me? Last night?" She said the last two words reverently and leaned over to

kiss him. Fredric drew back, surprised himself by his own action.

"Shirley, baby! I've got work to do! Lots and lots of work!"

"You wouldn't be giving me the brush, would you Freddie boy? Not after what you said last night?" her eyes snapped.

"After what I said—" he picked up his drink and swallowed hard. All he wanted was to lie down, to sleep; to sleep, perchance to have your number come up. That was more like it. More up-to-date. Why wouldn't she go away and leave him alone!

"Suki! Suki! Show Miss— Shirley to the door!"

"Bring me a drink, Suki," she said. "This poor darling needs attention." She sat on the bearskin rug at his feet and caressed his hands. Fredric wanted to pull away.

I'll go into a monastery, he said to himself, vehemently. I wonder if there's still such a thing as a monastery? Well, if not, I'll start one!

"You're frowning, baby," Shirley cooed. "Here, let me rub your forehead."

Suki appeared, padded

across the room, and delivered the drink to her. Fredric thought he should arrange a code with Suki, whereby on a certain signal he could have him put knockout drops in any particular person's drink. Yes, he'd have to talk to Suki about that first thing in the morning.

He took another swallow of his highball, hardly aware that Shirley had led him to the oversized sofa and was now cradling his head in her lap and leaning over to kiss away his troubles. It must have been a double, or a triple, that Suki had mixed him. He felt vague, detached.

Then, from somewhere, came the sound of bells. Eight bells. *Eight bells!* It was the ship's clock in the bookcase! Eight bells—eight o'clock! *Anna!*

Another bell rang as he rose quickly to a sitting position, Shirley's arms about him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a smiling Suki padding across to the apartment door.

"*Suki! Wait!*" Fredric belatedly, but the Japanese had already turned the latch, and now in the doorway stood

Anna, extreme surprise registering on her face at the sight of Fredric in another woman's arms.

The look of surprise proved to be fleeting, for somehow the lamp from the hall table was suddenly sailing through the air with deadly accuracy. It caught Fredric flush on his right temple. For the next few minutes, existence to Fredric Peters consisted solely of vague—but unmistakable—assorted screams, curses, Japanese entreaties, crashes, and thumps.

It was frightful, almost as though it were a nightmare. Gradually, awareness returned. Halfway across the room his eyes encountered the supine figure of Suki, a large knot standing out on his forehead and the fire-tongs lying significantly by his side. Further away, near the kitchen door, Anna and Shirley were battling it out, pulling hair, kicking, biting, scratching, and letting loose a stream of words such as Fredric hadn't heard since his Army service.

The telephone rang and Fredric absently picked it up. "Hello?" he said.

"Fredric? Is that you, Fredric?" there was a pause. "What's that awful racket I hear?" Suddenly, he recognized Jan's voice.

"It's—it's—it's the *television!* Yes! The *television!*"

"Not the words I'm hearing! *That's* not television!" The phone slammed down on the other end of the line. Despairing, Fredric poured himself another drink, a straight one. There's *got* to be a monastery, he thought.

Jan arrived at the open apartment door before he could finish pouring the drink. She had the fire-tongs off the floor before he could put the glass down, and had laid them violently against the side of his still-throbbing head before he could protest or put a hand up in his defense. That was all for Fredric Peters for that night.

GETTING to work next morning was the most painful thing Fredric had been called on to do for some time. He would not have gone at all had not Billy Coates telephoned him.

"It's the drawing, Fred.

You've got to be here. You know the law, all prospective numbers have to be at their assigned locations unless under actual hospital care."

He took a cab rather than the usual subway ride.

"Great guns!" Billy Coates exclaimed when his friend hove into view. "What hit you?"

"I've had it, Billy. I've had it! It all caught up to me last night. I'm joining a monastery if I can find one. I'm through with women—*all* women! Forever!"

With that he took out his formerly-beloved address and phone number book and began tearing it into tiny shreds.

"Hey!" Coates shouted. "Give me a break!" He grabbed for the book.

"Excuse me," said a well-modulated voice from behind them. They turned. "You *are* Fredric Peters," the man standing before them said, and turning, "and you, sir, are William Coates?"

They nodded.

"I'm from the Committee. Your numbers have been drawn. You'll have to come with me, now."

IT was a large, oddly shaped room suffused with pale metallic blue light. Fredric had no notion of time since the rough bus ride out to the building in the desert. He could vaguely remember being herded out of the building after an interval, his own mind seeming to drive him, along with thousands of others, into the open side of a huge ship. Then, oblivion. Distantly, as if from a great depth beneath the floor, came a powerful, steady, rumble.

"Fred? You okay?"

He looked up at the sound of his own name. It was Billy, seated on the floor not half a dozen feet away. He was smiling weakly.

"Well, it looks as if we'll have our answers now, whether we want them or not, huh?" Coates said. Fredric nodded.

He looked about him. There were several hundred other persons in the huge room with them; some conscious, some asleep. Then, across from where he sat, he suddenly saw a familiar face. It was Shirley! His eyes widened. There, not two feet from her, was Anna! And Jan!

"I'm picking up some thoughts, Fred," Coates said. "Are you getting them?"

He was getting them...*ap-titude...project behind schedule...ability...r u s h...ap-titude...* It was the Invaders, somewhere in the ship talking among themselves, random thoughts leaking out.

"Maybe if we concentrate we can get a line on what they want with us, or where we're going," Fredric said.

"Maybe Billy Coates said, but Fredric noticed he was looking about the room strangely, a look of puzzlement on his face. "You noticed anything about the *others* in here, Fred?"

Fredric straightened and followed his friend's stare. "No. No, except that I recognized some of the girls over there... *girls!*"

A thought forcibly broke through his consciousness. *Attention! Your attention! We are preparing for descent. All passengers will lie prone on the deck until further advised. Repeat...* It was the ship commander.

THE countryside was fantastically beautiful. Fredric surveyed it in amazement as they streamed down the gangplank toward the carpet-like grass of the landing field. In the distance, beyond a grove of spatulate-leaved blue trees, he espied a crystalline lake. To the right of the field was what appeared to be an ultra-plush hotel. To the left hundreds of children played in an immense playground.

His amazed staring was interrupted by sudden roaring laughter from Billy Coates.

"What's funny?" Fredric demanded.

"You! That's what's funny! You remember what we noticed aboard the ship?"

Fredric thought back. "They were all—all women, but us," he said slowly.

Coates nodded, still laughing, "And you remember those thoughts we picked up about a project, and *aptitude*?"

Fredric nodded, puzzled.

Coates, tears streaming down his face, went on, "And you remember what you swore off of just before our numbers came up?" Again Fredric nodded, anxiously.

"Well, take a look!" Coates pointed toward a large signboard at the edge of the field, then went off into uncontrollable laughter.

Fredric stared at it as the throng moved past him and his friend, going down the gangplank. He found the English translation halfway down the board. It read! *Welcome to Lor J. Project: Galaxy Repopulation. Item: Homo Sapiens. Stud Farm No. 9, District IV.*

Distantly, above the milling crowd from the ship and the laughter of Billy Coates, he heard the expectant whistles and cat-calls of hundreds of females from the direction of the hotel.

THE END

SCIENCE SHORTS

by EDGAR P. STRAUS

The world's largest radio-telescope, nearly a tenth of a mile long, is now being readied to go into full use at an observatory 93 miles from Paris. French scientists expect the monster instrument to reveal much new information about the sun.

Already preliminary work with the telescope has established one hitherto unknown fact: that the sun's radioelectric storms, which do much to disturb radio communication on Earth, originate not on the sun's surface but from within the solar corona, perhaps 62,000 miles above the surface.

Three dimensional television, one of the oldest dreams of science fiction, may emerge from a new type of video screen under development by

the Naval Research Lab.

The basis for the new screen is a process for depositing phosphor on the face of the TV tube in the form of thin transparent films, instead of the opaque white powders now in use.

Films that create different colors may be deposited on top of each other and may be lighted separately or mixed by controlling the speed or the direction of the electrons in the tube.

By using one film of each of the three primary colors, the complete color spectrum can be obtained by proper mixing, and the screen's developers believe that the process can be extended to provide an actual full-color depth illusion, without making use of the polaroid glasses required by the 3-D movies of several years ago.

FRONTIER PLANET

by CALVIN M. KNOX

illustrated by BOWMAN

It was so wonderful to live in the free and wide-open spaces after being cooped up on the overcrowded Earth. Yes, it was wonderful — until the naked aliens came!

IT was a deceptively peaceful day. The hot Sol-type sun had burned away the morning clouds, leaving clear blue sky for the afternoon. A gentle but sturdy wind was blowing in from the sea, carrying with it the faintly iodized smell of the ocean, bearing the tang of the water to the small Earth settlement.

Brian Elson turned to his wife and said, "There. Have you ever seen a lovelier sight in your life than that field—*our* field—with our crops growing in it? And the sun coming down, and the sea-wind blowing. Could you ever find anything like that on Earth, Mae?"

Mae Elson shook her yellow-haired head in reluctant

disagreement. She was ten years younger than her husband, at twenty-three. She had been hardly more than a girl when she married him, and not much past twenty-one when they left Earth to become settlers on the frontier planet of Hannebrink IV.

"I've never said it wasn't lovely, Brian. It is. It's the loveliest sight in the universe. But—"

"But what, Mae?"

She turned to him, looking up at his tanned face with its work-coarsened features. "Out there," she said, pointing to the jagged range of hills that served as the wall between the settlement and the wilderness beyond. "Back of the hills. The aliens—plotting, schem-



ing, getting ready to sweep down and kill us."

"Mae—"

"No!" It was an old argument between them, one that had never died since the discovery that Hannebrink IV was inhabited by intelligent humanoids in a pre-technological culture pattern. Humanoids who ran naked through the virgin forests to the west, and who threatened constantly to drive the Earthmen from their planet. "You keep telling me the aliens are afraid of us, that they won't ever attack. What about Mark Brannon, though?"

"He went too far from the settlement. The idiot was prospecting for uranium, I guess, and some wild beast must have killed him."

"And some wild beast carefully cut off his hands and feet and smashed his equipment?" Mae asked. "No, Brian. He was murdered by the aliens. The same way they're going to murder us, some day. In our sleep, maybe."

Elson sighed deeply, turned, let his hands rest lightly on his wife's shoulders. "We've been through this a million

times, Mae. Let's not discuss it any more."

"Don't I ever count?"

He frowned. "We discussed this step very carefully before we left Earth. We agreed there might be dangers—but we decided it would be worth whatever dangers there were, if only to get away from the muck and filth of Earth. Remember? It cost us five thousand credits to get here—and if we went back to Earth we'd be in debt to the spacelines for the next ten years."

"I want to have children, Brian. I don't want to have to live in constant fear of what might come down on us from behind those hills."

"Would you rather have your children grow up on Earth?" he wanted to know. "On a planet of twelve billion people, where there isn't room for a man to turn around without apologizing? And you know we'd be in debt if we went back. Your children would grow up in poverty. At least here they'll be free—tall strapping boys and girls who know what it's like to be a human being, instead of a sardine crammed into a can."

Mae stared at his broad, ruggedly unhandsome face a long moment. They had had this discussion so many times before, and always Brian had won. Inwardly she had to admit that he was right, that their children would be happier here on Hannebrink IV.

Except for the aliens. They cast a menacing cloud over every aspect of settlement life.

"All right," she said, defeated. "We won't talk about it any more." She glanced out toward the field. "I guess lunch hour's over. You'd better get out there and finish up. I'll get busy round the house again."

IT was a regular routine of chores. Most of the time she was so busy she had no time to think, worry, brood. She just worked, and she was happy.

Life on Hannebrink IV was incredibly different from life on Earth. She had been born on the west coast of North America, in the population area known as the Pacifica—a sprawling, brawling, jam-packed area that spread

from Washington southward to the tip of California, and held seventy-five million people. Somehow she had been singled out of all that mass by Brian, and he had married her, three years back, in 2762.

They had lived for a time in the allotted compartment for newly-married couples in the Eleventh Income Stratum—that is, in a one-room cubicle with adjoining semi-private toilet facilities and community kitchen, on the eighty-seventh floor of a hundred-fifty story housing development in what had once been the City of Los Angeles before the unification of Pacifica.

They had lived there two months. Then, one night, Brian had come home from his job with Central Transport bearing a sheaf of glossy folders and booklets. It was data on the colony-worlds.

There were over five hundred of them, new, unspoiled worlds out in the stars, pleading for colonists. Life was clean and fresh out there, but hard—and the worlds of Zyma and Vannevar VII and Leswick and Carbley and Hannebrink IV needed colonists,

brave men and women willing to give up their jobs and homes and forsake the overcrowded mother world forever.

It was a hard decision to make. Life on Earth was scarcely pleasant, but it was secure; there were few dangers, no uncertainties. Brian had a good job, and the labor regulations made it certain that he would hold that job so long as he was qualified for it. In a year's time they would be eligible to move on to a room with private bath; perhaps by 2770 or so they might even have a two or three-room flat someplace overlooking the Pacific. These were the things they could look forward to, on Earth.

The planets were less certain. The colony worlds had all been thoroughly surveyed—as thoroughly as a five-man survey scout team could manage, in a few months' time. How thoroughly could five men survey an entire world, even in a lifetime? It was *relatively* probable that any world passed by the survey teams was fairly suitable for human habitation. The planets were there; the invitation was

out. And Brian wanted to go.

Mae pored over the travel folders endlessly, and before long the bright natural-color photos had their effect. She had never seen a tree or a blade of grass, in her twenty years. The photos showed luxuriant green carpets broken by towering brown-boled trees heavy with fruit. Sweeping vistas of sky, broad waterways, open fields yearning for the hand of the cultivator.

She saw alien animals, grotesque, strangely colored, some terribly fiercelooking, others lovable, cuddly. She saw thick forests of red and violet trees shot through with blazes of yellow. She could almost smell the clear sweet air of the colony worlds. There was no need for a room filter out there, she thought. Once a week she changed the filters on the room-vent, and saw the pounds of soot that had been combed from the city's atmosphere.

After that, the path was clear. "We'll go," she agreed. "But where?"

"Let's look at the folders some more," Brian suggested amiably.

Three nights later, they had made their choice. Hannebrink IV, a world in the Alpha raz sector— Earthtype, with a diameter of 9000 miles and a gravitational constant of 1.003 Earth-norm; a world of blue skies and open fields, and three bright shimmering moons that cast strange intertwining beams of light which distorted the night-time shadows.

They drew their savings from the bank and applied for entry, and were admitted. They bought their ticket—one-way only, for two. It cost them all they had plus a little more, but the spaceline agreed to let them make up the deficit later, when they were settled.

The journey across space took several weeks. Mae was beside herself with impatience. Finally came the landing on Hannebrink IV.

The first few weeks of toil; the aches, the pains, all gladly contributed for the sake of breathing fresh air and seeing cloud-specked blue skies—

And then the discovery that the survey team had not quite

done a comprehensive job. That in the wooded hills in the heart of the continent there roamed nomadic aliens, barely civilized, full of hatred for the intruders from the skies.

But by that time; of course, it was too late to go back.

THAT night, as on all the other nights of the year, Mae and Brian Elson saddled their riding-beasts and rode down to the big frame structure in the center of the settlement that served as the community center and town hall for the young colony.

There were eleven hundred settlers, spread in a huge loose semi-circle over the fertile flatlands at the extreme eastern edge of the continent. On one side of them lay a sea 8000 miles across; on the other, a range of steep hills, and beyond them an untamed continent.

Communications between the farmhouses were poor. There was a phone hookup, but it was unpredictable and often out of order. The customary method of communication

was the nightly meeting in the town hall.

When the Elsons arrived, they saw most of the settlers were already there. The long hitching-post outside the big building was almost completely filled by the beasts the colonists used for transportation. Mechanical vehicles were impossibly expensive to import from Earth, and difficult for the colonists to build at their present level of mechanization; it was easier to use the sleepy-eyed horse-like creatures for getting around. They were angular things with coarse green hides and tiny horns behind their ears; they had a sort of hump amidships that made a useful natural saddle.

Brian dismounted, helped Mae from her animal, and deftly hitched the two beasts to a vacant place along the rail. They went inside.

Friends greeted them as they took their usual seats. Mae saw Liza Brannon, Mark's widow, talking to the Jespersens. Ever since her husband had been killed while scouting the area just on the far side of the bordering hills, Liza had lived alone, farming

her land as best she could and being helped out by any of the menfolk who had a spare hour. Mae pitied her. All the colony consisted of married couples; it was a strict requirement. Liza was the only single woman in the colony now. If any man's wife died in the next few years, he would marry her—but until then, she could only continue to wait.

AFTER about an hour of informal exchange of news, the meeting itself got under way. Claude Merriam, the tall, distinguished-looking man who served as Colony Chief this year, came to the front of the hall and called the meeting to order.

"I want to get down to business right away," Merriam said. His voice was deep and rich, a dark resonant baritone that had no need of artificial amplification. "We have a serious problem on our hands. I don't want to scare you, friends, but I don't want any of you to start getting overconfident either."

He looked around the room. "Three days ago I sent Paul Chasen and Harvey Roberts

on a scouting mission to the west. I didn't see any need for stirring up alarm by making any public announcement of this. They got back here this afternoon, and I want you to listen to them now. Paul? Harvey? Take over."

Two men that Mae knew only vaguely came striding through the aisleway and leaped lightly up to the stage. Paul Chasen was a farmer from the waterside area, tall and sun-darkened, with a mop of blonde hair; Roberts was older, about Brian's age, a short balding man with thick muscular arms and a barrel-chest.

He was the one who spoke first. "I guess I don't need to mention the death of Mark Brannon much to you. It's ten days since we found Mark's body at the edge of the cliff region. There was some talk that he might have been killed by the natives, and so Mr. Merriam came around and asked for a couple of volunteers to explore the area round about here and see if anything suspicious might be going on. Paul and I decided to take a look around. Paul,

you want to tell them what we saw?"

Chasen cleared his throat. "We took a pretty near westward route through the forest, following the river a way, then branching north at the first ford. We came across a band of natives about thirty miles from here, camping out. They didn't see us. But we saw them. They were holding some sort of execution, it seemed. One of their own kind was being put to death." He moistened his lips and gulped. "We found the body later. It—it looked just like Mark Brannon's body when it was found."

"That pretty much proves that it was the aliens who killed Mark," Roberts said. "But then we went a little further and came on a whole bunch of the aliens camping together. Three or four different tribes, it seems. Looking like they were getting ready to make war."

Mae Elson's hands felt chilled. She slipped one into her husband's hand and squeezed tightly. He squeezed back, but it was not reassuring, somehow.

Claude Merriam took the floor again. He looked gravely worried.

"Difficult times are ahead for us, friends. We're going to have to take emergency steps."

From the audience someone yelled, "What kind of steps you mean, Claude?"

"We'll have to be on our guard constantly," Merriam said. "Suppose you hear me out, and then I'll call for a vote on all my proposals.

"One: we'll have to establish a regular day-and-night warning system. I want men to fan out over the hill area on eight-hour shifts and keep watch. I've drawn up a rotation system for the shifts.

"Two: we'll have to be ready at home. That means periodic inspection of your weapons. The women will have to learn how to use a blaster, those of you that don't. I'm not saying there'll be an attack, but when the attack comes—if it comes—we can't afford to have anybody not taking part in the defense. There aren't enough of us to spare anybody.

"Three: we'll need a stock-

ade to protect the center of the settlement. I propose that each man in the community donate one hour and a half of his time a day to working on this stockade. I've drawn up a schedule for that too, by the way.

"Four: this part's unofficial, and not really to be voted on. There are almost six hundred couples in this colony, and even though we've been on Hannebrink IV almost three years, some of us, only a hundred thirty babies have been born. Maybe you're thinking that it isn't safe to have children on a frontier world until things are more stable here. Well, that sort of thinking has its truth in it, but you'll have to think about the other side now.

"We need population. The bigger and stronger we get, the less chance there is that the aliens ever will try to attack us."

Merriam paused a moment and glanced around the silent hall. "Okay. You've heard what I've had to say. You know the danger that exists. If anybody's against any of my

proposals, let him speak up now."

The silence became intense.

Merriam waited more than a minute; finally he said, "I'll consider that a vote of confidence. All right. We start organizing for defence tonight."

THE next few days were tense, frightening ones for Mae Elson. It seemed to her that the aliens were likely to sweep down in fury at any moment. As she moved around the farm, doing her chores in loneliness while Brian worked in the fields, she could not resist stealing an occasional look across the broad fertile plains at the dark rim of violet-hued hills that separated them from the territory of the aliens. Even now, she thought, they might be moving in single file over the hills, heading towards us—

She managed to look as if she were unafraid. As she milked the cow-beast (which was nothing like a cow at all, being striped laterally red and green, and with a long thin tube of a neck, something like a swan's, which made grazing a simple matter) she whistled

cheerfully to herself, and as she gathered the speckled blue eggs of the native hens or scrubbed the spotless prefabricated farmhouse or took goods to market, she pretended that life on Hannebrink IV was as safe as possible.

There were ugly reminders, though. Brian taught her how to use the blaster, and she practiced on a dead tree behind the house, lopping off limbs at Brian's commands. And for ninety minutes every day Brian left the farm to work on the palisade that was growing round the settlement, and one day in every eight he served a spell in the network of watchmen that roamed the hills.

Life went on. But the vision of alien marauders burned deeply in her mind's eye. She lay awake sleepless sometimes, thinking of the menacing creatures on the far side of the mountains.

At times such as those Brian would hold her tightly in his arms.

"Why aren't you sleeping?"

"I—can't fall asleep, Brian. I—keep thinking of—you know—"

"They can't hurt us, darling. Why don't you sleep, now?"

She closed her eyes, but it was no use. After a while she said, "I wish we had never come here. I wish we were back on Earth."

"We picked this place," he reminded her. "No matter what, we're better off here than back in that swarming beehive. You know that."

"Yes," she admitted finally. "I suppose so. But at least there we were safe. There's no security here."

"There's freedom, though."

He rolled over as if indicating he did not intend to carry on the discussion any further. Mae lay awake, staring upward at the beams of the ceiling of the house they had built together, and listened to the far-off cry of birds over the water and the closer rhythmic chirping of the giant crickets that nested just outside.

Something screamed, far away, a high wordless yell that hung a moment on the night darkness and melted away. Mae stiffened.

"Did you hear that?"

"Hunting hawk over the hills," Brian murmured sleepily. "I'm tired, Mae. Can't you stop worrying for a while?"

No, she answered silently. She turned away and tried to sleep, but no sleep came—only morning, finally, and with morning another day's work.

IT was Brian's day for serving in the hills, that day; he would be gone for eight hours, scouting the dangerous area flanking the wild wooded foothills. He readied himself for departure.

"Be careful," Mae said.

He chuckled. "I always am. But I don't think we need to be afraid of anything. Those natives might pick on one man if they found him wandering around their land, but I'll bet they never attack the settlement."

She looked at him a long moment and said, "Brian, will you promise me something?"

"Maybe. What?"

She hesitated. "If—if there is an alien attack, and we live through it—"

"Yes?"

"Will you agree to go back to Earth, then? Before any more trouble can hit us?"

He was silent a moment. Finally he said, "Okay. It's a deal. If the aliens attack and we survive, we'll go back to Earth. That's how sure I am that there won't be any attack."

He kissed her. "I hope you're right," she said, as he shouldered his alpha-rifle and left.

She turned away and entered the farmhouse again. *He'll be out there eight hours, she thought. Then if we're lucky he'll come home, and next week he'll have to go through the same thing again.*

Is it worth it? The constant fear, the uncertainty, the doubt?

For a moment she found herself wildly wishing that the suspense would end, that the aliens would finally get it over with and stage an attack. A *small* attack, so they could survive and go back to Earth when it was all over, back to Earth where life was cramped and unpleasant but at least safe.

She shook her head. It was crazy to think that way. She busied herself with routine chores, knowing she would have to get through them twice as fast today so she could make up for Brian's absence in the fields later in the afternoon.

The hours ticked away slowly. She ate alone at lunch-time, hating it as she always did when Brian was gone for the day. She waited for him to return.

At 1500 that afternoon she was in the fields when the house-phone chimed loudly. *It's Brian*, she thought, as she ran through the furrows toward the house. *He's calling to tell me he's on his way home. Oh, it'll be good to hear him again!*

She snatched the receiver from the cradle almost joyfully and said, "Hello, Brian? I've been waiting all day for you to call, and—"

"This isn't Brian," a man's voice said. "It's Leslie Chambers, Mrs. Elson."

The Chambers farm adjoined theirs on the east. What did he want, Mae wondered?

"Yes? What is it?"

"There's—been word from the hills, Mrs. Elson. Your husband and a couple of other scouts phoned in and said there was a mounted party of aliens riding toward them. Merriam's sounding a general alarm. The aliens will be here in less than half an hour. You'd better close up the house, stay inside, and keep your guns handy. Ah—too bad Brian's out there, Mrs. Elson. I don't quite know what to say to you. I—"

"That's quite all right," Mae said in a voice she hardly recognized as her own. *Brian*, she thought. *Brian!*

"You'd better call the people on your chain-list, Mrs. Elson. Good bye—and good luck."

"Thanks," she said. She hung up.

Merriam had drawn up a list of numbers: in case of attack, he would notify five settlers, each of whom would notify five more, each of whom would notify five more. That way, the alarm could be spread through the colony in a matter of a few minutes. With numb

hands Mae took down the list; it was a grimy slip of paper she had pinned to the wall above the phone.

She called the first name on the list and in a flat, toneless voice said, "There's an alien raiding party on the way. They'll be here in less than half an hour. Pass the word on down the chain."

It took only two or three minutes to notify the five names on her list. Then, hanging up the phone, she realized she would have to get busy.

The animals were outside the barn. She whistled for the dog and together they drove the protesting beasts to safety; it took nearly ten minutes. The sky was brilliantly blue; it was a surpassingly lovely day. Time seemed frozen in an eternal summer. And, thought Mae, right now the aliens are galloping toward the colony, and Brian lies dead out in the hills. It had to happen today, she thought. She was quiet, calm, bitterly resigned. This was no time for hysterics.

The hysterics could come later, she thought. If there was any later.

SHE sealed the back entrance, locked the window-shields, and closed off the cellar. There wasn't much else she could do. She opened the weapons case and took out a hand-blaster and a rifle-size alpha gun. Carrying the cold weapons as if they were vegetables, she made her way upstairs to the second story. There she pushed open a section of the casement window, big enough to get the alpha-rifle through, and experimentally, pointed it in various directions. From the window she commanded the approach to the house. The rifle had a range of—what was it, she wondered?—five hundred feet, or perhaps it was five hundred meters. Brian had told her, but she had forgotten.

There was nothing else to do. She sat by the window, holding the gun in unshaking hands, and waited nervelessly for the alien onslaught.

She tried not to think. She tried, but the thoughts came anyway:

We could have stayed on Earth. We could have lived in that little box of a room, and

sweated and cursed, and maybe by now we'd have children, and everything would be all right.

But instead we came out here and worked ourselves half to death. And now I have muscles I never dreamed I had, and here I sit in a window waiting for my husband's killers to come here and try to kill me.

She raised the gun quite calmly to her shoulder and tentatively squinted along the sight, making sure everything was in working order. She knew quite clearly and unemotionally what she was going to do.

This is my farm, now. And I'm going to defend it until I'm dead. That's what Brian would have wanted.

She waited, eyes narrowed, peering at the horizon. Minutes passed—and then they started to come, the gray-clad horde, sweeping down out of the hills. They rode bareback on the riding-beasts, and even at this distance their savage war-cries could be heard. They rode in single file, coming down now out of the hills and across the plain. Hundreds of them. Thousands. Coming,

now, to exterminate the sky-men who had taken part of their land.

Five minutes went by, and Mae saw them riding across the flat farmlands. They carried hatchets of some kind, she saw, and spears; scout reports had been right when they said that the aliens did not have the use of firearms. Mae watched them swarm around the distant Jesperson farm that lay nearest the hills. They had swept through the unfinished stockade as if it had never been built. She saw a cluster of them around the Jesperson house, saw angry blue bursts of flame darting from the upper windows. Aliens fell; more swept into the breach, while others continued the eastward ride across the plain.

They were close enough for her to see within ten more minutes. A party of eleven came riding toward the isolated Elson farmhouse. She counted them with care. Eleven, with a beribboned war-chief leading them, riding in a wedge-shaped formation. With great care she extended the rifle and started to aim.

She stared at them. *Maybe one of these killed Brian*, she thought.

They were squat ugly gray creatures, practically neckless, with leathery jointed hides that gleamed dully in the late-afternoon sunlight. They rode clinging to their mounts, legs wrapped desperately around the beast's underbelly. They were naked except for paint and ribbons. Guttural cries filled the air.

I've never killed before, Mae thought. When butchering had to be done, it had always been Brian who did it; she had never been able even to look. But this was no time for squeamishness now.

Slowly she squeezed the trigger. A bright burst of fiery blue sprang from the muzzle of the blaster, leaped across the air, buried itself in the dirt a hundred feet before the advancing group of aliens. Mae was angry; she had misjudged the range. And the aliens were scattering.

They rode toward her now in eleven different paths. She took aim again and loosed a bolt; it caught one of the

aliens square in the belly and— for an instant the savage creature stood upright on his steed, gray body outlined in a glaring nimbus of blue flame. Then he toppled backward, and was charred ash before hitting the ground.

One down, Mae thought. And ten left.

They were outside the house now, only a hundred feet away. Mae heard the dog yowling. She fired again and killed a mount; a second shot killed the rider before he knew what was happening. Mae felt perspiration coursing down her body. She began to tremble, but rigidly forced herself back under control.

She fired again, missing, and sending a shower of sparks over the ground. Her next shot was better; it ripped an alien in half. Three dead now.

She heard the sound of stocky bodies pounding against the bolted door.

No! They mustn't come in!

Pulling the window wide, she leaned out and looked down. Three of them had dismounted and were methodically dashing themselves against the main

door; it creaked and groaned on its hinges. She aimed the gun downward and fired. A blue splash of radiance rewarded her; two of the aliens dropped, the third leaped back. And in the same moment a hatchet came spiralling through the air from another alien off to the left. It cracked into the side of the building inches above the window, embedding itself.

There are only six of them now, Mae told herself. The sound of cracking timber came to her ears. *The back door!* They had split into two groups, now, and were assaulting the building at its most vulnerable places.

Brian, she thought for the thousandth time. *Brian!* She leaned out and drew a bead on one of the survivors. He looked up at her, snarled, glared with blazingly bright yellow eyes. His hatchet went back, his arm cocked, and she fired. Man and hatchet melted away. Five left.

She fired again, missing, and followed it immediately with a successful shot. Four left. Three, on the next burst. The back door yielded suddenly

with a tortured shriek of splintering wood.

They can come in, now, she thought quietly. She closed the window and turned to face the door of the room, drawing the hand-blaster. She waited.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. A lump grew in her throat. Heavy footsteps, bestial-sounding footsteps. The door crashed open.

She caught a glimpse of gray, hulking bodies hurtling through the door, and squeezed the trigger twice without aiming. Energy-flares blinded her; she heard animal-like grunts of agony. When she could see again she saw a charred body lying almost at her feet, and a second alien staggering sightlessly toward her across the room.

Her hand was quivering so hard she could barely aim. She fired once. The alien fell.

There was one more of them somewhere in the house, she knew. Somehow in the excitement she had kept a rigid count of the corpses, and there was an eleventh yet at large. She tensed; footsteps in the hall again. Grunts. Taking a

deep breath, she fired through the open door.

That was the last of them, then. They were all dead. Numbly, she walked to the window. She had killed eleven intelligent beings; outside, all was calm. In the distance she saw the men of the village banded together now, putting the surviving aliens to rout. The war-party had been a fiasco.

She waited for the hysteric reaction to set in, but oddly none came. She remained calm. *Maybe I'm the pioneer type after all*, she thought strangely.

She forced herself to smile. She had talked of going back to Earth—but that was impossible now. She was bound to this planet by ties of blood. There was a world to conquer here, savages to drive back, a wilderness to open. And despite herself, she had shown she could stand the place.

As she stared out the window, she frowned suddenly, thinking she had heard a sound.

Yes. Footsteps.

Another one, she thought. She cocked the gun.

"Mae!" a voice called.
"Mae, are you all right? God, I must be too late—"

Dumbstruck, she ran to the door, skirting round the dead aliens, and out onto the landing.

"Brian!"

He was coming wearily up the stairs, a ragged figure with bloodstains reddening one arm, with sweat darkening his clothes. But he was smiling.

"I saw the bodies," he said.
"I thought—"

"And you were in the hills," she said. "I thought—"

"They came sweeping right past me," he said. "I must have killed fifty of them. I was in a tree, picking them off. They got tired of trying to hit me with their hatchets after a while."

Tears of relief forced themselves to the edges of her eyes. "I—killed all these," she said. She stared levelly at him.

"I made a promise," he said. "If there was an attack, and we survived—"

"No," she said suddenly. "I don't want to go back to Earth any more."

"You—what?"

She smiled feebly. "Let's go wash those scratches of yours off. There's time to talk later."

Yes, she thought. There was time to explain everything, later—about the child, and about the world waiting to be won, and the work that needed to be done. Of how she had matured suddenly in those few moments of bloodshed when she thought herself a widow.

There was time to explain all that later, she thought. Right now Brian needed bandaging, and the house had to be tidied, the corpses removed. The back door repaired, the cows milked, the dog fed. And after that came fifty more chores before nightfall. It was a busy life. It was a good life.

The phone rang. Mae sped downstairs, lifted it off the hook. "Yes?"

"Claude Merriam speaking, Mae. The alarm's over for the time being. Just checking to see how things are down at your end of the settlement."

She smiled warmly. "Just fine," she said. "Just fine!"

THE END

NO PLANET IS SAFE

by HARLAN ELLISON

illustrated by ORBAN

The specifications said the new planet was Earth-type, and completely safe. But the survey team had had some experiences on other planets, and so they knew better

IT was the fifth planet out from a dying red sun.

The Celestial Atlas labeled it 608(E)44-M-512. Under the co-ordinates, in the micro-printing that allowed the gigantic volume to be printed on one roll of milix-tape, there were two lines of reference. Compiled by bounty-flitters in 3547, they were suitably vague, as usual, but offered at least a hint of what lay on the planet below:

Exploration potential excellent. Earth-type sun, long past any novation. Planet non-volcanic. Noted by Alderhog and Willmetz of InterSur, 3547. Colony potential excellent. Reconnoiter none. Spore count none. Flora-fauna survey none.

All of which meant nothing. Monroe Flynn, Captain of the *Suleiman Agate*, flicked off the milix-projector, and cursed loudly. He scratched for a moment at his crewcut head and swore again, "Dandruff," he murmured. Then he turned to the other formfit chair in the cabin. Shel Weiss, second in command, slid down on the end of his spine, made a staying motion with his hand.

"I know. Don't say it. Every new planet, every time you get a reference off that thing, you damn all the bountymen that ever took space."

Flynn stood up, coughed and sat down on the console board's ledge. He scratched alight a cigarette, and motioned with



it. "I know, I know. But those goddam stupid money-loving bastards. They were the next thing to useless. Take Alderhog and Willmetz, for instance.

"In the history books they're 'great explorers of the vast unknown' or some such crap. What were they really? *You* know what they were. Come on, for once *you* say it, Shel!"

Weiss threw up his hands in defeat. "Okay, so you win. They were lousy, money-scrounging bastards. In, record location for the recordiak, out, back to Interstellar Survey headquarters to report, collect the bounty money on each world they discovered, and off again."

"And," Flynn added with disgust, "they were too chicken to land and do any exploring, to help those coming after.

"Heroes indeed!" He drew on the cigarette and coughed again, saying, "I've got to lay off these things, they're killing me." He let his eyes wander to the projector screen, and the thought of the bounty men flared again in him. "With all the stuff we've got to worry about on these survey flights,

with the crap every planet throws at us, you'd think we could expect a little help from these minik-references. But no, instead the damned thing says every world is sweet and innocent and waiting for the taking."

Weiss stood up and stretched, yawning. "Think I'll get some sleep till we crack air."

"Just remember what *you* told *me* when I first signed on with you."

Flynn looked up questioningly, "What was that?"

Weiss ticked off on his fingers. "There isn't a safe planet in the universe. No matter how much like a baby crib it may look, it's just waiting to jump you. Don't trust anything in space but your reflexes and your intuition."

The Captain drew deeply again, nodded. "I was *so* right. *Sooo* right!" His eyes turned toward the ceiling.

Weiss made his way to the droptube, started to let himself into it. Flynn stopped him, saying, "Speaking of heroes indeed, how is our literary friend Ardway?"

That brought Weiss back into the control room. He put his hands on his hips and an annoyed look smacked itself across his features. "Are you *sure* that guy was assigned by InterSur to write a history of the survey ships?"

Weiss was growing more annoyed as he spoke. "Well," Flynn answered jauntily, "if he *isn't*, we've been hauling him as supercargo for over five months, for nothing. Why?"

"Cap, he just sits in that mock-up saloon, drinking enough White Star to bottle one of those Belthusian dinosaurs."

They both stopped smiling, then.

THEIR thoughts returned to their last planet of call. Belthus had taken its toll, as had each of the nineteen planets they had checked, since leaving Earth. In clearing the way for the settler ships, they had to do more than just note the location of a planet, then return for bounty money. Belthus had seemed quiet and pleasant and jungle-covered, and it had claimed four men ...and one woman.

Neither of them spoke of it, but each mention of the planet and its terrible residents, was a painful reminder to them both.

Weiss went on slowly, "Anyhow, if he's going to write the grand and glorious, all-details, account of what we do in these tin cans, why the hell doesn't he peel off his ack-ack and start writing. He just sits down there, slopping up booze. And spouting concepts of the universe."

Flynn smiled wryly. "All wrong of course."

Weiss snarled, "Of course, all wrong! What the hell does a landsider like *him* know about space or what goes on in it? He's got a batch of cock-eyed, high-flown theories, and he just *waits* down there, for some crewman to come by, so he can grab him by the ear, and waste his time telling him how beneficent and wonderful the cosmos are. A crock of slops!"

Flynn chuckled softly, indulgently. "Look, Shel, we got assigned the responsibility for Jack Ardway, and he's one of Earth's greatest living authors, and we've got to *give him* the

run of the ship, so he can bring forth this great work of art. So, for Chrissakes, don't get him sore at you, or we'll go down in history as traitors, or something."

Weiss delivered a blaring sound of rudeness to that, and slipped into the droptube. "Crock of slops," he threw back, and was gone below decks.

Flynn continued to chuckle absently for a moment, then he turned around, and rested the weight of his body on his hands as he stared across the console ledge into the viewplates. The ash on his cigarette got quite long, and drooped.

He stared at the oncoming bulk of 608(E)44-M-512, and his thoughts went back across the star-paths to each of the worlds they had checked and catalogued and readied for colonization. Each trip got worse. It seemed Mother Nature hated Man, and had set each alien world as a trap for him. No matter how peaceful the worlds had seemed, they had each held many hidden dangers, into which the Earthmen had stumbled.

His fear had grown in him, though he would not show or speak of it to anyone. He was afraid, and ahead lay yet another world to be conquered.

The ash dropped off and hit his hand. He did not notice.

AS the *Suleiman Agate* bolted down, as the telescoping landing-legs (the tip of each one being a rotary rock-drill) bit down and fastened solidly in the ground, standing the big ship at ninety degrees straightaway, Jack Ardway made his way up the companionway. The corridor had been the droptube, but it had been shut down to allow more power for the landing thrust. He pulled himself along, slipping and losing his balance, and finally opened the loktite at pilot's country.

He staggered across the cabin, and slumped into one of the two formfits. "Wheew," his arms flopped loosely over the sides of the chair, "if I don't lose forty pounds before this trip is finished, it won't be the fault of the construction engineers. How the blazes do you fellows *make* that tricky passage."

Shel Weiss continued checking off bolt-down readings, did not turn around, but tossed off, "We don't."

"Touche!" Ardway grinned, but his forehead wrinkled. "You don't much care for me, do you Mr. Weiss?"

Weiss turned around sharply, about to snap an answer, but Flynn's curt, "Shel!" stopped him. He blew air between his thin lips, slapped a hand against his thigh, and turned back to the plot-tank and the readings.

"Anything I can do for you, Mr. Ardway," Flynn asked politely. There was strain in his face; it was obvious the presence of Ardway kept him tense.

Ardway was a soft-looking man, all contours and slidings, with no definite form or planes to his face. His eyes were his most important feature, for in them lay a world of sensitivity and perception. His hair was worn long in an outmoded style, and he wore his severely-cut jumper as though it were not his own. He seemed a displaced person, separated from his own time and place by aeons; by a force from within himself.

"Yes, Captain," the writer said, "there is one thing. I, uh. I read your little bulletin. I don't much care for it."

"You mean the 'stay-back' bulletin?"

Ardway nodded. "I came out here with you to write a book, Captain, and sitting behind in a comfortable cabin while you handle the primary operations won't get it done properly."

Flynn tried to communicate his position. "Look, Mr. Ardway—"

"It's Jack. Even to my enemies," he tossed the last toward Weiss, who stiffened.

"—Okay then, Jack. Look. InterSur assigned you to us as supercargo, and whether you knew it or not, we were advised—no, damn it, we were *commanded*—to give you whatever you wanted, to let you see anything you wanted to see... but to bring you back in the same condition you left in. If that makes sense."

ARDWAY grinned tightly. "Yes, sure. It makes sense, but what I want to see is what you won't *let* me see. How am I supposed to write a book hon-

estly, about colonization—as a definite history, I might add, which is no simple task, even for me—if I'm locked in my stateroom at every landing. We've bolted-down on four planets, and on each of them there has been some trouble. Now *that* is what I'm obligated to write about. Yet you won't let me come with you to see this business in the flesh."

Flynn dropped his charting stick, and walked over to the writer. "Look, Mr.—sorry—Jack, we've downed on four planets before this one. On Topaz we lost sixteen men to a fungus we thought was water-scum. On Helpman our Chief Warrant Officer was *stung* to death by some goddamned pseudo-bees we didn't even realize *existed*!

"Indus had wild boars that sliced the legs off a group of the best mapmen we had on board. All five of them died from loss of blood before we could get to them.

"And Walla-Walla is like Old Faithful. Remember Con-jacki, the wiper from 'B' deck? He got his when a red-hot geyser erupted under him. We lost three other men there, besides

him. Now if you think we're going to risk getting ourselves court-martialed for allowing you to die, you're very much wrong. No go."

Ardway stood up, and spread his hands. "Well then, gentlemen, I'll just have to wait it out on board, it seems."

Weiss tossed over his shoulder, "Seems like."

Ardway snorted, and staggered back down the droptube-corridor.

He stopped, turned around and came back to add, "Don't you gentlemen think there's a planet where there is *no* danger? Can't you conceive of such a place...or is that outside your ken?"

"Listen, Mr. Writer," Weiss spun on him, "we've been tooling this tin-can through space for five years, and we thank God nightly we're still alive to report back. We've got Last Will and Testaments written out and filed with InterSur. We don't start any continued stories. *That* ought to let you know how we feel."

Flynn shushed the second-in-command, added, "Mr. Ardway, the universe doesn't like

us, and we have to fight for every inch we get. No, I'm sorry, but I'm sure there's no such thing as a 'safe planet'. That's an impossibility, a contradiction in terms, a paradox. Safe and planet just don't go together."

Ardway tilted his head as though considering their vehemence. He smacked his lips faintly as though resigned to their opinions, and disappeared back the way he had come.

"Goddam stupid nose-in," Weiss snarled from the readings.

"Oh, shut up, Shel, you're getting to be a pain in the tail. He only wants to do his job, same as you."

Weiss snorted wryly. "The only difference between him and me is that I can get killed doing mine."

There was no answer to that, so Flynn went back to the check-off board. "Okay, let's forget it. Now what have you got. Down the line."

Weiss sat down on the console ledge, ticked off the readings as Flynn inquired:

"Spore-count."

"Total negative."

"You sure? Nothing deleterious?"

"That's what the spore-counters say. They haven't fouled on us yet, no reason to think they did this time."

"Okay. Gravity?"

"Three decimals below Earth-normal."

"Nice. Atmospheric range?"

"About two places below EN."

The readings went on for twenty-five minutes. Final report tabulated, the results spelled out: PLANET SAFE. PLANET COMPLETELY, TOTALLY, WONDERFULLY, WHOLLY, INEXPLICABLY SAFE.

They did not trust their readings.

They were scared white.

THE first day out on the planet was uneventful. Flynn and Weiss stayed behind, cans on their ears, com-masks on their faces, living centers of the *Suleiman Agate's* communication system. The ten men of the exploration team made their delicate surveys in two half-track crawlers, only emerging when they were certain no danger was about. Even then, they stayed in contamination-

tion suits and their flame-rifles at the ready. Nothing. The reports all tallied with the ship's readings. Nothing.

They discovered a few quicksand bogs, but those were easily noted and avoided, for the sand was dark blue, almost always surrounded by safe green grass. Eight miles to the ship's south, they found a deep crevice that ran on into a series of faults, and later into a canyon of steep cliffs.

There were traces of manganese, iron, coal, oil, uranium and trace-elements that would make the planet a paying proposition, if and when the colonists came. Still, they were cautious.

They remembered Topaz.

Topaz, too, had been an idyllic paradise. They had lost sixteen men on Topaz. So they walked softly.

Yet nothing turned up that showed even the slightest danger to a human being. It made the men jumpier than ever.

The second day they uncovered fourteen distinct species of alien life, none of which was larger than a dog, and only one of which might—under *extreme*

provocation—become troublesome.

Three of the survey men took out the flitter and circumnavigated the planet. All the way they remained in complete contact, and reported no signs of intelligent life. No villages, no roads, no cities, no buildings, no structures and of course, no public works. Again, still, yet, nothing. Tension mounted.

Things eased off when they reported a huge, mammalian whale-creature that swam in the deeper sections of the three great oceans. *That* was something, but still...nothing.

It appeared they had finally hit it; a completely *safe* planet.

On the fourth day, the first man died.

FLYNN was dictating to Ardway in the latter's cabin. The soft-bodied writer had wanted a complete statement by the Captain, outlining the careful procedure that went into securing a world for colonization. They had reached the stage of discussing what sites were picked for cities, when Weiss burst in without knocking.

Flynn turned on the formfit,

and Ardway's transcriber clattered off his lap as the door slammed inward. Weiss was standing there, sweating, and his mouth worked at nothing.

"What's the matter? Shel, answer me!"

Weiss motioned updecks with his hand. "It's started. He's dead!"

Flynn started violently, and was shaking Weiss's shoulders. "Who? Tell me who?"

Weiss struck hands from him, adjusted his shoulders, "For Chrissakes, lay off. I'm not hysterical. It's just the *way* it happened scared the hell out of me?"

"*Tell me!*" Flynn shouted.

Weiss made a flat-slashing hand movement through the air. "Tomas Arreiz, you know, the little curly-headed galley boy. Got it with his own knife. A serated thing about two feet long. Out beyond the perimeter."

Flynn's dark eyes opened wider. "What? How the hell did he get out *there*? And for what?"

Weiss shrugged. The perspiration had disappeared from his face, but his voice was still shaken. "The other boys said

he was off to collect some native herbs he wanted to try in a soup. They told him nix, and they were going to phone me updecks, but he persuaded them to let him go; said it would be a surprise. He was going to run his own analyses on them, and if they were oke he was going to use them."

Flynn slumped back into the chair, his hand over his eyes. Weiss paused, Flynn urged him to continue.

"He had on a beeper, and they knew where he was, and somehow he got past the doggie-posts. Then about five minutes after he hit those woods—you know, off to the North about thirty, forty feet, his beep changed sequence. *Then* the stupid bastards phoned me. I *told* you we shouldn't take any first-trip cadets on this hop. Cap, it'll happen every—"

"Shut your face and give me the rest!"

"What rest? That's all there is. He was in the woods, kisser-over-teakettle on top of a tree stump, with the knife shoved in his chest and out through the back of his neck. There's always *one* jackass like him in every complement."

Flynn did not answer. His face was quietly grave.

After a few minutes he got up, and motioned to Weiss. "Come on, let's get suited, and you're going to show me where he is. He's still out there, right?"

Weiss nodded agreement. "I figured you'd want to examine him."

Flynn stopped short of the door, and said to Ardway, "There's your theory of a safe planet. Right in a worthless cocked hat. *Now* do you believe me?"

Ardway shrugged no-knowledge, and the two officers left. For some time after, Ardway pounded on the transcriber.

That evening they buried Tomas Ariel Arreiz...

...inside the perimeter.

WITHIN a week, eight more had gone. No two died the same way. Dawson, who was a fauna specialist, was sucked into one of the blue-mud quicksand pits. Though they never retrieved his body, his beeper kept sending out signals—from the depths of the mud pit—till out of desperation they damped it out.

An old-timer of thirty-six name of Kenzing, fell screaming into the canyon to the South. Grasper, Linsley and Murphy sent their flutter crashing into the sea, and Tracy, Church and Nojonen were lost trying to rescue them. Church's beeper was heard going out to sea, so they assumed one of the whale-things had gotten him.

That made eight, and everyone was frantic.

When the ship's company was assembled, the theories that came out were fantastic...and frightened. Everyone from the remaining galley hands on up to Weiss had their pet philosophy, and plan of attack.

Camesole, from Plotting: "They're energy-creatures!"

Tegiersky, from the pile-room, in co-authorship with his fellow rodman Halvorsen: "They's invisible."

Ellik, hydroponics: "Telepathic, they live underground."

Scott, Alain, Semlik and Ross, all four of whom watched over the course-comp: "Tiny as mites...they attack in hordes...then go back to the underbrush."

Flynn waved away each of these solutions with the proper amount of ridicule. *None* of them were right, chiefly because the readings hadn't turned up any strange or invisible energy waves. And the rest were just too fantastic or negated by the fact that *any* culture, mite-sized or not, had *some* signs of civilization. Perhaps not skyscrapers and cross-country roads, but *something*. Yet no such evidences had come to light; the planet was completely alien-free.

"Then why are we dying off like flies?" one of the crewmen yelled from the rear.

There was no answer.

Nor was there an answer the next day when the crewman who had yelled at the meeting was found dead, his neck broken from a bracing-rod fall of eighty feet. They were dying, and no one knew why. But they *were* dying, and something was killing them.

The *Suleiman Agate* was in trouble.

"**T**HEN why don't you just blastoff and mark this planet dangerous?" Ardway asked. It was the evening of

the day the crewman had fallen from the bracing-rod.

Flynn looked at Weiss, and the curly-haired second-in-command looked back. "So tell him," Weiss snapped.

Flynn spoke smoothly, quietly. "The drive controls have been out of working-order for a day and a half. We've had three techs in there, with a guard on the door, working steadily, trying to get the damned thing back in shape."

Ardway looked surprised. He glanced down at the perennial clipboard of notes, on his lap, and pursed his lips. "Oh? Some mechanical difficulty?"

"Mechanical, hell!" Weiss snapped. "Sabotage! Somebody got in there and levered an emergency-jack bar between the course-comp shield and the mechanism. They twisted every goddamned circuit out of shape, and spilled the guts of the drive controls onto the deck. Mechanical? Sure, sure, if our little aliens can slip through steel plate, get past guards, and leave no trace. I think it's somebody on the ship!"

There was no concealing who he thought was behind the

damage. Ardway looked placid, untroubled.

The writer sat forward in the formfit, his belly easing out over his jumper's separating segment. "You really think one of the men on this ship is behind all these deaths?"

Weiss snapped his head. "Yes."

"You're a fool, Weiss."

The second leaped up, took a quick step to the writer, and his fist came out viciously before Flynn could drag him back. Ardway sat very still, not touching his cheek where the fist had grazed off. "That doesn't change my opinion, Weiss."

Flynn stepped between them, harried and tired. "Look, knock it off, you two. I've got a big enough thing on my hands without worrying which of you will kill the other first."

"Stop it, Shel. There's no sense to it. Why would Ardway be behind this?"

Weiss was flaming mad. His face was flushed, and he snarled, "If he was going to do another book—maybe one that would net him more profits, in addition to this InterSur-sponsored job—about his 'hazard-

ous, deadly flight', it would look good to have more incidents aboardship."

Flynn clucked his tongue. "Shel, you're crazy; there's no sense to that. It's ridiculous. You're not thinking properly!"

Ardway interrupted. "I think that's part of our trouble, Captain. I've been doing some thinking, and some research. How would you like the answer to this problem? Maybe find your invisible aliens?"

Flynn spread his hands to indicate, "Of course."

Ardway presented his point, "Then give me full freedom on the ship, and the perimeter. I promise you I'll take every precaution."

Flynn shook his head no with defiance. No it was going to be. Ardway repeated his proposition, adding, "It's the only chance, or I'm certain more men will die, and we'll never leave this planet."

It took him over an hour, with Flynn adamant for most of that time, and Weiss completely snarling, the full time.

Finally, Flynn agreed.

BRISTOW and Tripp died two days apart. The former

was lost with all his soil-samples in a sand-hole four miles from the ship, while his three companions watched the pit sift down over him. They were helpless as he went under. Tripp choked to death in his contamination suit. No reason for its having happened.

Well into the second week, Ardway caught Weiss trying to clobber the repair work done on the drive controls.

It broke the situation apart.

Dead night on the planet, and the ship secured, with two guards to every entry position. Two hours before dawn, the alarm-dingers went off with a banshee wail, sending men thumping from formfit bunks...

Flynn found Ardway standing over the crumpled form of Weiss, in the corridor outside the course-comp room. The guards had been knifed, and they lay twisted together in bloodied heaps down the hall from the door. Flynn stepped over their bodies, and confronted Ardway with a masked face that was covering broiling anger.

"What's the meaning of

this, Ardway? What happened to Weiss?"

Ardway shook his head. "I think you'd better get the crew together, Captain. *All* the crew. Even the guards."

Flynn made to raise an objection, and Ardway assumed a tone the Captain had never heard before. He commanded the Captain, "If you want this thing solved, and if you want to get off this planet alive, then dammit! Do as I say, *now!*"

Flynn turned away, pressing his fists into the sides of his legs. His anger was barely restrained as he told the jump-man, "Arnie, get on the squawkbox, get everybody in the ready room. Now!"

The crew assembled as quickly as battle station's call could bring them, and once they were settled, uneasily, Flynn turned the meeting over to Ardway. Weiss was sitting up now, his head bandaged from the blow Ardway had delivered with the butt of a flamer.

"I did some checking," Ardway began, holding his clipboard away from him. "How many men have died here on this planet, I asked myself.

Twelve, not counting the two guards tonight. Then I checked off the way each had died, from Arreiz to that fellow in the sand trap.

"There was one thing in common with all of them, and one thing about each death so obvious I knew everyone of you had overlooked it."

A crewman jeered at the writer, "What makes you think you're any different from us? How can *you* spot it if *we* can't?"

"Simple," Ardway replied, "you've been, as Mr. Weiss puts it, 'Tooling this tin-can' while I've been confined to my stateroom. And you've all been conditioned."

"What are you talking about, Ardway? Are you insane?" Flynn was on his feet; his authority and now his entire crew's sanity, was being threatened.

"I'm talking about this, Flynn." The writer turned to a crewman at random. "You. What did they teach you at InterSur about a safe planet?"

The crewman scratched his chin, answered quickly, "No such thing. No planet's safe.

They all got hidden dangers. Look at *this* one. Supposed to be safe, but is it?"

Ardway jabbed a finger at him. "Yes! That's just it. It *is* safe. Completely, 100% safe, without any dangers at all."

"Then why have fourteen men been killed?" another man yelled.

"Not killed," Ardway cut him off, "just died. And every one of them, with the exception of the two guards tonight, were accidents. Plain and simple, just accidents!"

ARDWAY showed him the clipboard. "Look at this. See how every one of them, from Arreiz on down, were victims of their own tension, their own conditioning. Not one death that wasn't an accident. Arreiz was the first. He set off what had been festering in all of you since you landed here. You'd all been conditioned to expect just what you got—a million different worlds, each with its hidden, waiting dangers. So when you hit this planet, this *safe* planet, you couldn't accept it, and your conditioning—*y o u r s u b c o n s c i o u s* conditioning—started to

wear away at the edges of your calm.

"It might have happened on other worlds, but each of them had something you could fight against, some real danger, and this problem never came up. But this planet is that impossibility you'd never believe existed—a safe planet. So your nerves tightened, and you got more scared than ever. Because the danger you knew was out there, kept hidden.

"Then Arreiz slipped and fell, or whatever happened, and got the knife through his belly. You never for a moment stopped to consider it as an accident. You *couldn't*...your fright and your conditioning wouldn't let you.

"And it set off a whole string of accidents. Because as each of you began to believe invisible aliens were after you, you became more wary...and the warier you got, the more careless you became."

Flynn was standing loose-limbed, unbelieving. Such things as this did not happen. "But—but what about Shel here, and those guards, and—and what about the sabotage on the drive controls?"

"It was Weiss all the way. Since no real aliens were coming to the fore, his subconscious took over, to give him a tangible enemy. When he went to sleep, he got up, and wrecked the controls. Tonight he had to come back and do it again. Temporary insanity. I expected something like this, though I didn't know who the man was. I got to the drive room too late to save the guards, but I smacked him as he came out. That's it."

Flynn could not believe it. He stood before the crew, shaking his head like a dazed animal. Finally, he ordered a return to stations, had Weiss locked up in the brig, and slumped into a formfit.

Ardway watched him for a moment, then said: "This is perhaps the most dangerous problem InterSur has to face."

Flynn nodded agreement. "How did you find out..."

Ardway sat down beside him. "I think I knew right from the start, Captain. I had no conditioning. I came on this flight fresh; with few preconceived ideas. But every man in your complement has been trained to expect death and

danger from every world—so they couldn't accept this one for what it was. I had to wait and hope you'd snap out of it, but I can see now that it's too ingrained."

"We'll have to close up this world, too," Flynn ran a hand through his hair. "Because those colonists will have the same trouble."

Ardway shook his head. "No, I think you're wrong. Your colonists just *want* worlds that are safe. The ones you tell them are safe, they *believe* are safe. They won't have any trouble here. It's a good world, if you'll give it an even chance."

THERE was nothing left in Flynn but defeat. He was a sick man who had found out he was sick. "What are we going to do...this sort of makes our team more dangerous than helpful. We'll kill ourselves off if we continue."

Ardway stood up.

"It's a problem, all right. There'll have to be an entirely new way of preparing for these flights. But now that you know you have the problem, you should be able to solve it."

"Do you have any ideas about that?" Flynn asked, not looking up.

Ardway was halfway across the ready room, on his way to the stateroom where his book waited to be written. He stopped and turned around. "Yeah, I've got an idea."

"Take along a disinterested spectator on every flight. Like maybe a writer."

"We aren't *all* crocks of slops, you know."

He disappeared down the companionway, and the Captain sat staring after him for a long, long time.

While outside the ship, 608(E)44-M-512 waited for the people who were soon to come. Waited. Quietly, pleasantly, safely.

THE END

ONE TO A CUSTOMER

by THEODORE R. COGSWELL

The little alien had some weird gadgets and wonderfully clever devices for sale. They had marvelous powers, and for a price a man could have such a gadget exclusively!

“AND,” continued the alien persuasively, “I can allow only one to a customer.”

Alan Shirey looked down at the clutter of oddly-shaped gadgets that were spread out on the low coffee table.

“What’s that?” he asked at last, pointing to a small sphere of a dull grey metal with a well-manicured finger.

Mccal smirked as he picked the little globe up and rolled it back and forth in one taloned hand.

“A force field generator that has a very special sort of effect of the female sympathetic nervous system.”

“What sort of an effect?”

The little being tittered shrilly. “It makes them...eh...sympathetic. Once a girl

gets within its operating radius, the most improper thing you can think of will seem to her to be the most natural—and delightful—idea in the world. A little push here,” the globe suddenly shimmered faintly, “and it’s on. Another one *here* and it’s off. Interested?”

Alan shook his head and then walked over and eyed himself complacently in the plate glass mirror above the fireplace.

“My dear fellow,” he said with just a touch of condescension in his voice, “when you’ve been around this little planet of ours just a bit longer you’ll find out that when a man has what I have, no mechanical aids are necessary.

Why should I pay you ten thousand dollars for a widget to take care of an operation I've been able to handle satisfactorily by myself ever since I was fourteen?" Turning back to the mirror he patted a straying lock of blond hair back into place and then gave himself a boyish smile.

The alien bobbed his misshapen little head apologetically. "Sorry. Traveling salesman, you know. Week in this system, week in that. Never really get to know a place."

Alan wandered across the large living room and sprawled lazily out on a studio couch.

"Tell me, little friend," he said, "if you're what you say you are, why are you trying to sell your samples? And while we're whying, why did you pick my back yard as a parking place for that whirley-gig of yours?"

Mccal shifted uneasily and then glanced apprehensively upwards as if he half expected some malignant being to come oozing down at him through the ceiling.

"I got reasons," he mumbled finally.

"What kind?" demanded

Alan. "You might as well start talking, because you aren't about to sell me anything until I find out what's going on."

The alien stole another nervous look at the ceiling and then suddenly scuttled over to the coffee table. "Not to change the subject," he said, "but for fifteen thousand I could let you have a light shield. Complete invisibility at the flick of a switch and..."

"Climb off it," said Alan coldly. "I asked you a question."

MCCAL lapsed into a sulky silence for a moment and then finally said grudgingly. "Well, if you've got to know this place sits pretty well out by itself and I thought I'd run less chance of being spotted. Another thing was the swimming pool out in back. I figured that if you could afford one of those you'd have enough cash around to pay my prices."

Alan pulled a plump wallet out of his pocket, tossed it in the air, and then caught it. "Sure I got money, lots of money. But if your gadgets will do what you say they will, you could walk into the front of-

fice of any big corporation in the country and come out with more millions than you'd know what to do with. Why don't you?"

The little alien sighed wistfully. "I know. But I don't dare go near any of the population centers with this stuff on me." He gestured toward the coffee table. "It radiates. If the Observers ever spotted me it would be the *squeebles* for sure, and this being a primitive area there'd be no torsion off for good behavior. That's why I have to peddle these things on the sly. I figured that by only bringing in one of a kind and making sure they would be used with discretion, there wouldn't be enough fuss raised to *attract* their attention, at least not until I had a chance to put a couple of thousand light years between me and Sol."

"Sounds good except for one thing. What are you going to do with United States currency when you get where you're going?"

"Oh, I won't take it with me," said Mccal. "I need it to buy things here."

"What kind of things?"

"Artifacts. Real pre-atomic blow-up artifacts. I got a couple of collectors lined up back home who won't ask any questions about the source."

Alan eyed the little alien sceptically for a moment. "You don't strike me as a particularly ethical sort," he said. "With that invisibility gadget of yours you could walk off with anything you wanted. Why go to all this trouble?"

Mccal recoiled from the suggestion in obvious horror.

"Theft? From primitives? Do you know what the Observers would do to me if they..." He turned green at the thought of whatever it was and his voice trailed off into incoherence. Then with an effort he regained control of himself.

"Look," he said in a pleading voice. "In spite of everything you've said about being bored with everything, there must be something you want that you haven't got!" A sudden change in the expression on Alan's face spurred him on. "Or somebody you're afraid of?"

Alan got slowly to his feet and began to pace the floor, a strange brooding expression in

his wide set eyes.

"There is...and there is," he said huskily. "A girl named Marion...Marion Jonston. I want her and she wants me." He tossed his head petulantly. "I'm not accustomed to not getting things I want!" With an effort he slipped back into his usual pose of studied nonchalance.

"There's a husband involved. He looks like an oversized Neanderthal and he's tougher than I am and he's wealthier than I am—and a hell of a lot nastier. If I ran off with Marion he'd get to us eventually. And when he did it wouldn't be pleasant, not pleasant at all." The momentary tightness of Alan's face indicated that 'not pleasant' was somewhat of an understatement.

Mccal rubbed his hands together happily, reached for a wicked-looking little pistol like object that lay by itself at one corner of the table, and then pulled back in disappointment when the other shook his head and continued.

"I don't want to kill him. It wouldn't be any fun that way." His words were accompanied by a faintly unpleasant

smile. "You see, little friend, I'm a spoiled brat. Marion is the first thing in my life that I've wanted that I haven't been able to get. He's got to pay for that, and the worst thing I could do to him would be to let him live knowing I had her."

The alien gestured excitedly toward the little invisibility machine. "With this you could slip in and out of his house whenever you wanted to. He'd never know anything about it."

Alan snorted impatiently. "Stupid! I just told you that the whole point would be in his knowing and not being able to interfere."

Mccal brooded over his stock for a minute and then let out a sudden whoop. Grabbing up a small metallic box with a dial at one end and a push button in its center, he waved it excitedly in the air.

"All right," said Alan, "what is it?"

When the alien told him, he reached slowly for his wallet.

Later that evening Alan picked up the telephone from its cradle, hesitated, and then turned. "You aren't trying to

pull a fast one, are you?" he demanded harshly.

Mccal threw up his twisted little hands in protest. "Look for yourself," he said, gesturing toward the array on the coffee table. "Like I said before, there's only one of a kind. The one you bought is the only twister in the whole lot."

Satisfied, Alan started to dial. "O. K., little friend. It's a deal." He grinned savagely. "In fact I might even have another customer for you before we're through."

THE hulking bull-necked man shambled slowly across the room toward the couple, his great hands clawed out before him as if they were seeking a throat. Mccal whimpered in terror and tried to huddle farther back in the far corner of the living room, Alan just smiled pleasantly and slid one carressing hand down the sleek contours of the girl who cowered against him.

"Easy does it, Jonston," he said. "Might as well relax and get used to the idea."

The approaching figure snarled and shuffled to a stop.

"Yeah," he said, his voice

thick with rage, "yeah, let's. I don't want to get this over with too quick. I got a little place where we can be alone, just the three of us, alone for a long, long, time."

Alan didn't seem disturbed. "Tell me, laddy," he said lightly, "what would you say if I told you that you were going to have to spend the rest of your life sitting around gnawing your hairy knuckles while Marion and I were off someplace playing house?" He smiled satyr-like and ran his hand possessively over the girl again.

The taunting words almost goaded the other into a charge but with an effort he held himself back.

"I got you," he whispered thickly. "I got you dead to rights. But even if you was to get away I'd find you. You know I'd find you. There ain't no place where you could hide. No place at all."

Alan's left arm circled the girl tightly while his right hand gripped the little silver box concealed in his pocket.

"Place? No," he said lazily. "But time? YES! If you're still around five hundred years

from now, look us up." With a patronizing smile he pushed the button on the time warper that would catapult him and the girl instantaneously into the future.

THE country home was gone except for one crumbling wall but the sun was warm and the grass velvety soft against his bare skin. Alan reached languidly over and patted the tanned behind of the girl who sprawled beside him in abandoned exhaustion.

"That was fun, doll," he said lazily. He picked a long spear of grass and began to nibble it contentedly.

Closing his eyes, he lost himself in pleasant thoughts of the husband left behind.

"Alan!"

The shrill scream of terror catapulted him to his feet.

"What's the matter?" he shouted, and then spun around in response to her terrified pointing just as a great gorilla-like figure vaulted heavily over the wall and hurled itself upon him. In a moment he was caterwauling like a trapped animal and clawing to escape. And then, as the darkness

rushed in, he felt great hands let go of his throat and clamp vice-like onto his right leg. There was a sudden twisting wrench and then a splintering agony that smashed him down into black unconsciousness...

That voice he knew. The rough stones against his back told him that he had been propped up against the ruined wall. He slowly forced his eyes open and looked dully down at the leg that bent out in front of him at an odd angle. He didn't want to look up.

"One to a customer," he said tonelessly, "and only one of each. He said he had only one of each. He said he had only one of each."

A hand suddenly jerked back his head and he looked up into a distorted face, a face still grimed with fresh loam. The clothes had long since rotted away and the squat hairy figure looked more ape than human.

"Ya guessed right," it said, "but ya guessed wrong. He did only have one of each." One massive fist opened to show a shining cylinder with a needle-like orifice at one end.

"Your little friend sold it to

me—except I don't think the money did him much good. When I left he was staring at something oozing through the ceiling and squeaking like a ruptured mouse." Jonston gave an obscene chuckle. "This thing worked, though, just like he said it would."

"What is it?" croaked Alan.

"Well, it's this way. Back where he came from a guy's maybe taking a trip from one star to another and it's maybe a thousand year deal. There ain't much in the way of scenery so he just sets this little knob for how long he wants to

be knocked out, jabs the needle in a vein, and he's like dead until he gets there.

"You said to look you up in five hundred years so that's just what I set it for. Then I went and dug a hole and pulled it in after me. Slept like a baby, too, except I did a lot of dreaming." A great hand turned Alan's head slowly so that he could see the blank horror-filled face of the unclothed girl who huddled sobbing on the grass.

"Guess what I was dreaming about. Just guess."

THE END

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THE SPACISTOR

A startling new electronic amplifier called the "spacistor" is now undergoing experimental development, and promises to cause an even greater upheaval in the world of electronics than the invention of the transistor did six years ago.

The spacistor is a semiconductor device developed by the Raytheon Manufacturing Company, and it combines the best properties of the vacuum tube and the transistor, the two devices it is likely to make obsolete when it reaches the commercial market about 1961. Spacistors will make possible more compact designing of guided missiles and rockets, radar and communications equipment, and home TV and radio sets.

One spacistor is only four pinheads long and one pinhead wide, roughly the size of a transistor. Its purpose is to amplify the power of weak electronic signals. Its advantage over amplifiers in current

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ON THE PLANET "SOL-
ARIA" Earthman Elijah
Baley should NOT have blushed
to the ears when beautiful Glad-
ia Delmarre casually stepped
out of her shower to talk with
him! For all Solarians CON-
SIDERED THAT ENTIRELY
PROPER . . . because their so-
cial contacts were carried on by
VIEWING through two-way
television.

And just as Elijah (an Earth-
man brought up in under-
ground cities) was terrified by
Solaria's naked sun, the Solar-
ians dreaded mingling with
other HUMANS. Physical con-
tact was out of the question.
Even DISCUSSING such things
was obscene!

That's why Elijah had good
reason to be shocked when
Gladia actually allowed him to
SEE HER IN PERSON—when

she brazenly reached out her
naked fingers to TOUCH HIM!

There was no doubt left in his
mind that there was something
unspeakably strange about this
exotic temptress. But it was be-
coming more and more difficult
for Elijah to admit—even to
himself—that she was his prime
suspect in a fantastically sordid
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